

Ehrman–Licona Dialogue On **The Historical Reliability of The New Testament**

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From February 19 through May 6, 2016, *TheBestSchools.org* hosted an in-depth dialogue on the historical reliability of the New Testament between biblical scholars **Bart D. Ehrman** and **Michael R. Licona**. The dialogue is now complete, and comments are still open on each portion of the dialogue.

Ehrman and Licona find themselves at the center of an ongoing controversy over whether the New Testament provides a reliable historical account of the life, work, and teachings of Jesus. Indeed, the two have clashed on this question on more than one occasion.

TheBestSchools.org therefore invited them to take part in what we call a Focused Civil Dialogue. The point of such a dialogue is for both parties to advance the best case for their position as well as to refute the case of their interlocutors. We are grateful that both Dr. Ehrman and Dr. Licona accepted this invitation.

In such a dialogue, each party to a controversy develops what he or she regards as the strongest points in favor of one's own position while also defending against what the other party alleges are the weakest points in one's position. We like to suggest that each interlocutor articulate five strong points and five weak points.

Briefly, in such a dialogue both Dr. Ehrman and Dr. Licona each contributed (1) an interview, (2) a statement, (3) a response, and (4) a reply — in that order.

The plan for such dialogues is that the interviews each typically take 6,000 words, giving each the opportunity to favorably discuss one's own life and work. The statements typically take 10,000 words and constitute the portion of the dialogue where each most forcefully advances one's own case. The response and reply together will typically take another 10,000 words, enabling each to refute the case of one's interlocutor.

Drs. Ehrman and Licona argued the following theses:

Dr. Ehrman: *The New Testament is not a reliable historical guide to the life, work, and teachings of Jesus. In particular, it provides no convincing evidence for the bodily resurrection of Jesus.*

Dr. Licona: *The New Testament is a reliable historical guide to the life, work, and teachings of Jesus. In particular, it provides convincing evidence for the bodily resurrection of Jesus.*

Thus, Drs. Ehrman and Licona each provided four written contributions, all freely available and posted here at *TheBestSchools.org*. Our main task in overseeing this dialogue will be to ensure that it does indeed retain its focus—that the points of strength and weakness raised by both parties do indeed get squarely addressed in their statements, responses, and replies.

Dr. Ehrman is the James A. Gray Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. His research interests focus on New Testament Studies and History of Early Christianity. Ehrman received his Ph.D. from Princeton Theological Seminary. He is the author of several books, including *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*.

Dr. Licona is Associate Professor of Theology at Houston Baptist University. His research interests focus on New Testament

Studies, Historiography, and Apologetics. Licona received his Ph.D. from the University of Pretoria. He is the author of several books, including *The Resurrection of Jesus: A New Historiographical Approach*.

Bart D. Ehrman Interview

Bart D. Ehrman is the James A. Gray Distinguished Professor of Religious Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. One of the world's leading New Testament scholars, Ehrman has written or edited some 27 books on the subject of Jesus, the New Testament, and Early Christianity, comprising not only scholarly studies, but also widely adopted college textbooks and popular bestsellers. Ehrman's work combines rigorous textual criticism with close attention to the historical and cultural context of early Christian literature. He is perhaps best known for his contention that Jesus of Nazareth did not think of himself as divine, but rather was "deified" by the subsequent apostolic tradition, both oral and written.

In his personal journey, Professor Ehrman has traveled from born-again fundamentalist to liberal Christian to agnostic.

Thank you very much for taking time out of your very busy schedule for this interview, which serves as a prologue to your upcoming Focused Civil Dialogue with Michael Licona here at *TheBestSchools.org*.

We will naturally be focusing in this interview on your views regarding the New Testament literature and the historical Jesus. However, before we turn to those matters, we would like to ask you about yourself.

When and where were you born? What did your parents do for a living? What was your religious upbringing like? Describe your K–12 education. What were you particularly good at in school?

Bart D. Ehrman

I was born and raised in Lawrence, Kansas (though, as a young child, I spent seven years in Fremont, Nebraska). My father was a salesman for a corrugated box company; my mother was a secretary. They both were firm believers in education, but obviously were not academics themselves. Still, my brother Radd and I both went on to do Ph.D.s. He is a professor of Classics at Kent State University, an expert in Latin. We teach many similar courses. Go figure.

Ours was a religious home. We went to church every Sunday, said grace before every evening meal, and talked about God at ease. I would say my mother was the steady rock when it came to religious upbringing. When we moved back to Lawrence, when I was in the fifth grade, we started attending Trinity Episcopal Church. We had tried several other churches, but my mom preferred that one since it seemed to be the only one that “*talked about God*”. I was an altar boy there all the way through high school, faithfully in church every week.

I was a good, but not a great, student all the way through high school. I was smart enough and reasonably disciplined, but not enormously rigorous in my studies. I preferred playing baseball and tennis. But in my junior year in high school, I started to excel on the high school debate team, and in my senior year, I more or less went crazy on it. We ended up winning the State debate championship, and the work habits I developed in that context stayed with me through college, turning me into an unusually driven learner — till this day.

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We understand that you became a Christian during your high school years. Describe your conversion and the sort of faith you

held back then. What prompted you to attend the ultra-conservative Moody Bible Institute in Chicago for college? Describe your time there, high points and low points? After leaving Moody with a three-year degree, you attended Wheaton College outside Chicago. What was that transition like? Did you find Wheaton's broader evangelicalism congenial? Where were you in your faith when you graduated from Wheaton?

Bart D. Ehrman

Even though I had been a committed church person my entire life – I prayed every day, attended church faithfully every week, confessed my sins, said the Nicene creed, and so on – I became convinced my junior year in high school that this was not enough. I had started attending a *Campus Life Youth for Christ* meeting every week, and the leader of the group, a twenty-something named Bruce, convinced me that to be a “*true*” Christian I had to “*ask Jesus into my heart*” and “*accept him as my Lord and Savior.*” And I did so, when I was fifteen.

Bruce was a graduate of Moody Bible Institute. He – and I – did not think of it as “ultra-conservative.” We thought of it as “Christian.” Other schools (Wheaton, Trinity, Biola) were okay, but they weren’t *seriously* Christian. I was an all-or-nothing kind of person. I decided that if I wanted to be committed to Christ, I needed to give my life over to learning everything I could about my faith and about the Bible on which it was built. So, I decided not to go into college debate (e.g., at Kansas University, where most of my friends went), but to attend Moody Bible Institute.

I loved it there. I majored in Bible-Theology and absolutely threw myself into my classes. I memorized entire books of the Bible (on my own). I saw myself, and my friends, as “real” Christians.

After graduating from Moody, going to Wheaton was a bit of a letdown for me religiously: they weren't as serious about their faith as we had been. But there at Wheaton — where I majored in English — I took Greek, read tons of English literature, studied history, and generally began to realize that the world was a lot bigger than I had ever imagined.

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Upon graduating Wheaton, you went to Princeton Theological Seminary, a bastion of reformed and conservative evangelical faith at one time in its history, but a school that was much more mainstream and theologically liberal when you attended it. But why Princeton? Why not continue on with your graduate education at Wheaton? Or at Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, north of Chicago? Either of these schools would have been much more in keeping with the Christian tradition that you were used to. What drew you to a place like Princeton, where you surely knew that your faith would be challenged?

Bart D. Ehrman

When I was at Moody, I was warned to be careful when I went to Wheaton, because people there were not serious about their faith. When I went to Wheaton, I was warned not to go to Princeton Theological Seminary — a Presbyterian school training ministers — because “there aren't any Christians there.” Really. I did indeed know that my faith would be challenged there, because it was “liberal” (REALLY liberal for my tastes). But I had a clear and definite reason for going there.

I had decided, already at Moody, that I wanted to teach New Testament at the college level. Moreover, I decided that I wanted not to teach as a scholar in a Christian college, but as a Christian in a secular college, as a kind of witness to my students. As it turns

out, I was pretty good at Greek at Wheaton, and decided that I wanted to do a Ph.D. focusing on the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament. My Greek professor, the beloved Jerry Hawthorne, told me that if I really wanted to pursue this line of scholarship, I should go to Princeton Theological Seminary, to study with the great Bruce Metzger.

I knew nothing about Princeton Seminary, other than that it was liberal and probably “not Christian”(!). But Metzger taught there. So, I went, armed with my evangelical commitments and beliefs, but eager to learn all I could about Greek manuscripts.

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At Princeton you earned both the standard ministerial degree, the MDiv and the PhD. What did you focus on during your master’s and doctoral studies? As with Charles Templeton and many other evangelicals who have attended Princeton Seminary, your faith took a hit there. What was the turning point there in your shift from conservative to liberal Christianity? Describe the liberal Christianity that you came to embrace. How did your conservative friends react to your changed faith?

Bart Ehrman

I was a bit nervous going to Princeton Seminary because I knew that most of the faculty — and, I assumed (wrongly, as it turns out), the vast majority of the students — would be highly liberal, not believing in the literal truth of the Bible. But I was ready to “take them on”! I was required to take a range of courses in church history (loved those), theology, pastoral counseling, speaking, preaching, and so on. But my idea all along was to take as many Bible courses as I could. And I did.

It was a different universe from the one I had previously inhabited. The critical study of the Bible (which does not mean that

you're "being critical" the whole time; it means that you are engaged in high-level critical analysis) is very different from the "simply-believe-it" approach we had taken at Moody. I was highly resistant to it. I simply thought these people weren't being Christian. But over time I came to see that in fact there was a lot to be said for having an open mind (as opposed to a closed one). If you read the Bible without assuming that there cannot be any mistakes in it, you realize, "Hey – there are mistakes in it!" I started realizing, reading the NT in Greek and the OT in Hebrew, that there are discrepancies, contradictions, historical and factual errors.

I was completely resistant to seeing these problems. But they were there, right in front of my eyes. I prayed about it incessantly. I tried to come up with solutions. I read what Bible-believing scholars said about such things. But I was completely committed to pursuing the truth, even if it was taking me someplace I did not want to go. I came to realize that the Bible was *not* the "inerrant, verbally inspired, Word of God." I continued to think it was the Word of God; but I came to see that it was also a very human book, as well, with all the problems that human books otherwise have.

I continued to be a very committed and devout Christian. But the Bible was no longer an inerrant, infallible revelation for me.

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During your time at Princeton Theological Seminary, you worked closely with Bruce Metzger (1914–2007). In his heyday, Metzger was regarded by many as the premier New Testament scholar this side of the Atlantic. Interestingly, Metzger was always broadly evangelical (there's no question, for instance, that he held to the bodily resurrection of Jesus). Given his towering presence at Princeton and his deeply influential role in your own New

Testament studies, why didn't you follow his example and keep to a broadly evangelical faith?

Bart Ehrman

As I indicated, I went to Princeton Seminary to study with Metzger, and I took every single course I could from him. With some fear and trepidation I made a point of meeting him face-to-face early on. I told him my interests. And I got to know him a bit. As time went on I got to know him better and better. In my second year (out of three), I asked him if he would direct a Master's thesis I wanted to write (theses were optional; few students did them). He agreed. I ended up staying and doing my Ph.D. under his direction.

There is really no doubt that I was closer to Metzger (right) than any student he had ever taught. He not only directed both my MA thesis and Ph.D. dissertation, and chaired my exam committee. He also, later, asked me to serve as his assistant for the NRSV Bible Translation Committee (for which he was chair), which I did for a couple of years. I stayed in his home on occasion. And he became a father figure for me.

Why didn't I stay that way? I really wanted to do so. I was desperate to do so. But the more I studied, the more I realized I just couldn't do it.

Metzger was reluctant to call himself an evangelical, though looking back, I suppose he was one, of sorts. He did believe in the literal Virgin Birth and the physical resurrection. But he also thought the creation story in Genesis was a myth; that whoever wrote 2 Peter, it was not the apostle Peter; and that there could be (some) discrepancies in the Bible. But he was a devout, conservative, committed Christian.

Why didn't I stay that way? I really wanted to do so. I was desperate to do so. But the more I studied, the more I realized I just

couldn't do it. There were more discrepancies and contradictions in the Bible than Metzger was willing to admit (as every other biblical scholar that I had any connection with at Princeton knew full well).

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One irony we cannot help but notice is that you are a co-author with Metzger on the fourth edition (Oxford, 2005) of his magisterial *The Text of the New Testament* (earlier editions 1964, 1968, and 1992 list him as solo author). Generations of students in biblical studies have cut their teeth on this book. One upshot of that book is that the texts that make up the canon of the New Testament are remarkably well preserved and that we can reconstruct pretty accurately most of what was originally there. In other words, even if higher criticism raises many disconcerting questions about the New Testament, lower or textual criticism does little promote skepticism of that book. And yet some of your books — notably *Misquoting Jesus* (HarperOne, 2005) — seem to take a very different tack, arguing that the very text of the New Testament is much in doubt.

Please explain this seeming inconsistency. Metzger was still alive when *Misquoting Jesus* appeared in print. Did he read it? What did he think of it?

Bart Ehrman

I've always thought that it's odd that people see this as an irony. I've never, ever seen it that way at all. I've seen it as two sides of the very same coin.

People who read *The Text of the New Testament* possibly are lulled into thinking that with all the evidence cited there, we can know with almost complete certainty what the New Testament originally said in every place. But, actually, that is not the thesis of the book at all. The book is about how we go about the incredibly

difficult process of knowing what the authors of the NT wrote, given the circumstance that we don't have their original writings, or copies of those originals, or copies of the copies of those originals, or copies of the copies of the copies of those originals. People reading that book for some reason overlook that this is the very real problem that textual scholars are confronted with. Metzger never overlooked it.

His book was indeed the classic in the field, and still is. Oxford Press decided that it needed a new edition of it, to be brought up to the present day in terms of its scholarship. They asked Metzger if he would like some help in revising it, and yes, he would like me to do it with him. And so I did. It was a terrific experience. We worked closely on it. I added several new sections. We revised portions together. It was a completely joint project.

About the same time, I was writing my *Misquoting Jesus*. That book was less about how specialists reconstruct the NT text (the theme of the Metzger book) than it was about the enormity of the textual problem (as presupposed in the Metzger book). Yes, we have abundant evidence for the text of the NT. But very little of that evidence is early, and much of it is highly problematic. In *Misquoting Jesus*, I explain the problems and spend a good chunk of time talking about the history of scholarship trying to solve them.

Metzger did indeed read the book, and he told me that he liked it very much. He simply didn't have the knee-jerk reaction to it that other readers have had, since he realized that I wasn't making anything up in it, but simply explaining to a lay audience what the issues and problems are with the text of the NT.

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You no longer consider yourself a liberal Christian, but rather an agnostic or atheist. Please describe this further shift in your views. We understand that the problem of evil was responsible for this shift, and in particular your dissatisfaction with Christianity's ability to address and redress this problem.

Christianity offers various theodicies, perhaps the most widely held one being due to Augustine, who claimed that God allows evil because of the greater good that he brings out of it. Why doesn't this solution satisfy you? Are there any other Christian theodicies that you think do better, even if they are still unsatisfying to you? How do you understand evil now that you've embraced agnosticism/ atheism? Are you satisfied with your present understanding of the problem of evil?

Bart Ehrman

This is obviously a very difficult issue to address in 300 words or less! I have devoted a book to the question, *God's Problem* (HarperOne, 2008), and even that is very much only barely scratching the surface.

So, let me give just a brief background. When I was teaching at Rutgers in the mid-1980s, I was asked to teach a class on the problem of suffering as presented in different parts of the Bible. That was a revolutionary experience for me, as I realized in teaching the class just how many explanations for human suffering can be found in the Bible. Some of them are at odds with one another. I explain all that in my book.

When I taught the class, I was a deeply committed Christian. And I continued to be for years afterward. But I began to wrestle deeply with the problem of suffering. There are some kinds of suffering that make sense (to me): humans do wicked things to one

another, involving such awful experiences as incest, rape, torture, mutilation, killing, war, and so on. Those things one can explain on the basis of free will. If we weren't free to do such things, we would not be fully human (I think that explanation is problematic, as I detail in my book, but it would take too long to explain why here).

I couldn't believe that there was a God who cared about his people and was active in the world and intervened on behalf of those in need and answered prayer, when there is an innocent child who starves to death every five seconds.

Other things are less explicable: famine, drought, hurricanes, tsunamis, birth defects, and so on—all leading to horrible, unimaginable suffering. How do we explain these things? I used to have explanations (based on what I had read in biblical scholars, theologians, philosophers, and so on). But I got to a point where I just didn't think it made sense any more. I couldn't believe that there was a God who cared about his people and was active in the world and intervened on behalf of those in need and answered prayer, when there is an innocent child who starves to death every five seconds.

I certainly don't buy the Augustine view. It's all well and good to say that suffering makes us better, makes us more noble, brings a greater good. But what about that poor three-year-old child who starved to death since you started reading this paragraph? She had to experience such gut-wrenching agony to make my life, or anyone's life, the world's life better? And that's true of all the children who have starved to death — millions of them, just over the past few years (not to mention all the years since Augustine was writing). I came to a point where I just didn't believe it.

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The Bible, and the New Testament in particular, has been at the heart of so much of your thought and work over the years. Briefly, if you had to give a timeline for your views on Scripture, what would that timeline look like? Where are the main discontinuities or shifts in your view, and what were the catalysts? When was the last time that you did a complete read-through of the Bible?

Bart D. Ehrman

When I was a child, I respected the Bible, but knew nothing about it. A good part of the reason for that is probably that I was raised Episcopalian, rather than Baptist! When I was in high school and had my born-again experience, I realized how completely ignorant of the Bible I was, and really wanted to learn about it — not just to read it, but to understand it, know it, love it, memorize it, recite it.

I came to realize that the Bible was not the inerrant revelation from God... But I was still completely enthralled and committed to knowing more about it.

So, late in high school, I started reading it assiduously and attending Bible studies. I then went to Moody, where I went hardcore on learning the Bible and memorizing it, devoted to each and every part of it. At Wheaton, I learned how to read the NT in Greek and did so as much as I could. When I went to Princeton, I learned how to read the OT in Hebrew, and considered doing a Ph.D. in Hebrew Bible. At that point — in my early 20s — I came to realize that the Bible was not the inerrant revelation from God (it had mistakes), as mentioned earlier. But I was still completely enthralled and committed to knowing more about it.

And I still am. Now, I see the Bible as a very human book. But it is by far the most important, earth-shattering, life-changing book (well, 66 books) the world has ever seen.

Main game-changers in my relationship to the Bible: becoming born again; learning biblical languages; recognizing the true nature of the Bible (as a human book).

I read the Bible *all* the time. Rarely, anymore, do I need to read an entire book at one sitting, though I do on occasion. But I read portions massively and repeatedly. The last complete read-through was probably a couple of years ago, when I wrote my college-level textbook, *The Bible: A Historical and Literary Introduction* (Oxford UP, 2013).

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Let us turn now to the main question before us, which will also be the focus of your upcoming Focused Civil Dialogue with Michael Licona – namely, the historical reliability of the New Testament accounts of the life of Jesus, and especially of the resurrection.

Your position, as we understand it, is that some of the events portrayed in the New Testament writings can be established to have occurred to a high degree of certainty on the basis of the evidence provided by those and other contemporaneous literary remains. For example, you have written an entire book – *Did Jesus Exist?* (HarperOne, 2013) – to show that Jesus of Nazareth was a real person who lived in Palestine during the first decades of the Common Era, was condemned to death by the Roman prefect Pontius Pilate, and was crucified, all more or less in accordance with Scripture.

Nevertheless, you also maintain that other events recounted in Scripture, notably the resurrection, cannot be established as historically accurate on the basis of these same documents. Your

reasons are complicated, and have been explained by you in numerous volumes, so we can hardly expect to do justice to them here. But let us try to cover some of the most important points.

First, there seems to us to be a tension in your writings between the claim that the resurrection is poorly supported by the available documentary evidence and the claim that no amount of evidence could possibly provide adequate evidence for the truth of such a miraculous or supernatural event. This suggests to us that we need to distinguish carefully between the philosophical underpinnings of your historical inquiries and those inquiries themselves.

Let us begin, then, by asking whether you believe there is such a thing as objective historical truth at all. That is, setting aside the case of Jesus altogether, would you agree with Leopold von Ranke (left) that in general the proper goal of the historian is to determine “how it really happened”? Or do you incline more to a “postmodern” skepticism with respect to the whole notion of historical truth? Or are you somewhere in between these two extreme positions?

Bart D. Ehrman

I’m not completely sure what you mean by the term “objective historical truth.” As you probably know, it’s a loaded term that is problematic for lots of reasons, but I probably don’t need to go into them here (for which we can all be thankful!) So, let me try to explain my views as well as I can without saying anything particularly complicated.

If you’re asking me whether I think the past happened, then the answer is absolutely yes. If you’re asking whether I think we can be virtually certain that some things in the past happened, then again, absolutely yes.

The problem is that there are *some* things that are far more certain than other things. It is certain, in my mind, that my

basketball team, the UNC Tar Heels, lost to Notre Dame last night. I wish it weren't so, but it happened. I saw it. I know. Now, in *theory* some clever television producer could have altered the delay-tape of the game somehow so that it only seemed like they lost, when they actually won. But I don't think so. I'm absolutely sure they lost.

If you ask me about a game that was played 150 years ago, I would not be as certain. If you ask me about an event that happened 1,300 years ago, I would be even less certain. If you asked me about something that took place 13,000 years ago, I would be even less certain. If you asked me about a basketball game that got played last week on Mars, well, at that point I'd probably say, no, I don't think so.

So, yes, I do think the past happened. I think in some cases, we can know what happened. In most cases, we cannot know what happened. And some things are more probable as having happened than others.

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Assuming, then, that there is such a thing as historical truth – events really did occur in the past in such and such a way, whether or not we can ever know about them – let us begin to explore the particular case before us.

Everyone agrees, we think, that the study of the past presents peculiar difficulties. For instance, our knowledge of past events depends entirely on present causal consequences of those events — the events themselves are lost to us. Also, historians are unable to run controlled experiments. And so forth.

However, it seems to us that the skeptical approach to the question of the resurrection of Jesus adopted by you and other secular, atheist, or agnostic authors is not primarily connected to

these sorts of problems at all. That is, we suspect that historical issues are not what is really driving most skeptics' skepticism — that if they read a report of occurrences similar to those described in the canonical Gospels occurring somewhere in the world today, they would be equally skeptical, no doubt chalking them up to either deception or credulity. Moreover, we suspect skeptics would not believe even their own eyes, if they experienced an appearance like that of the risen Christ recounted in Scripture. Rather, they would suspect some trick, or perhaps that they were hallucinating.

In short, isn't a prior philosophical determination that there is no God and miracles do not occur what is really driving your skepticism (and that of other authors taking a position similar to yours), not any particularities regarding the admittedly difficult historical record?

Bart D. Ehrman

That's a common misreading of my view, and I certainly understand why people think that this is what I think. But it's not what I think. I've repeatedly explained in my writings exactly why it's not what I think, but for some reason people keep telling me it's what I think. Life can be like that sometimes.

The view I have of Jesus's resurrection, or of his other miracles, or of anyone else's miracles (say, Apollonius of Tyana's or Elijah's) is the view I had when I was a Christian, when I believed in God, and when I believed that miracles could and did happen. I have the same view now as I had then. So, it's not an atheist view.

The view is that even if miracles did happen in the past — let's simply grant that they happened — there is no way to establish that they happened using the historical disciplines (i.e., to show they are, using your term from earlier, "objective historical truth"). Again, that's not a result of atheist, anti-supernaturalist presuppositions. It

is the result of historical method. Historians simply have no access to supernatural activities involving the actions of God. Only theologians (among the scholars) have access to God. Theologians can certainly affirm that God has done miracles, but they are affirming this on theological grounds, not historical grounds.

It would take about five pages to explain that – but I’ve explained it a lot in my books, most recently in *How Jesus Became God* (HarperOne, 2014). I’d suggest someone interested in the reasoning simply read the book. Here, I’ll just make the fundamental point, which will surely confuse people (and so, maybe, encourage them to read the book!): “History is Not the Past.”

The past is everything that happened before now. History is what we can *establish* as having happened before now. Miracles may be in the past. But they cannot be established as having happened. Big difference.

To see why, see my fuller explanations!

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Let’s shift gears now. Let us set aside the whole problem of the existence or non-existence of God and the possibility or impossibility of miracles, and focus instead on the historical evidence as you see it. As we understand it, one of your main claims is that the best historical evidence shows an “exaltation” view of Jesus, as opposed to an “incarnation” view. Could you briefly explain what these terms mean and the basis for your support for the former view, for those of our readers who may not be experts on the New Testament?

Bart D. Ehrman

I’m afraid that’s not actually my view. But first let me explain the terms. An “exaltation” view of Christ is the view that at some

point of his existence, Christ was “exalted” by God to a high level of divinity. This was the view of the earliest Christians, as seen for example in Paul’s speech on Acts 13:33 (where God made Jesus the Son of God by raising him from the dead; you find a similar view in Romans 1:3–4 and in more exalted terms in Philippians 2:6–11).

Some people who held this view in early Christianity thought that Christ started as a human, and God made him divine; others thought that Christ started as a divine being and God exalted him to a higher level of divinity. In both cases, God exalted Jesus, either at his resurrection, or at his baptism, or at some other point of his existence.

An “incarnation” view of Christ is the view that Christ started *out* as a highly exalted divine being who became human temporarily. The word incarnation literally means something like “having come in the flesh.” In this view Christ started in heaven with the Father and became a human being. You find that view, for example, in John 1:1–14.

My view is decidedly not that one view is right and the other wrong. My view is that the earliest followers of Jesus had an exaltation Christology. They knew Jesus as a man, but they came to believe he had been raised from the dead. Once they thought that, they assumed he had been taken up to heaven and made divine. As time went on, other Christians began to think that Jesus was not originally a human, but that he was a divine being for his entire life, and then an incarnation theology developed.

I’m not saying either view is right or wrong (or is “my” view). I’m saying that Christianity started out with an exaltation Christology and then developed an incarnation Christology. Most Christians hold the latter, today.

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One of the points you emphasize is that the accounts of the Passion provided by the authors of the three synoptic Gospels (Mark, Matthew, and Luke) differ from one another on numerous points of detail. From this you infer their unreliability.

But the three Gospels all agree on the basics of the story: the trial, the condemnation, the scourging, the crucifixion. If their disagreement is evidence of their unreliability in matters of detail, why isn't their agreement evidence of reliability in fundamentals?

Bart D. Ehrman

It is important to realize that all four Gospels ultimately owe their traditions about Jesus to the oral traditions that were in circulation about him soon after his death, among his followers who had come to believe that he had been raised from the dead. These disciples were intent on converting others to believe, as well. But to convert someone to believe in Jesus, they had to tell them *stories* about Jesus — including, especially, the stories about his death.

These stories were then in circulation for several decades before anyone wrote them down. The essentials of the story were widely shared among the many different story tellers: Jesus had gone to Jerusalem during Passover, ignited opposition among the Jewish leaders there, who had him arrested and turned over to Pontius Pilate, who ordered him executed for claiming to be the King of the Jews. And so these stories form the heart and soul of the Passion narratives of the Gospels, and naturally, in their broad contours are similar.

The question is not whether there could be some historical reliability among these stories. Most scholars would agree that there are historical methods we can apply to the stories to see if the

events they narrate actually happened or not. (Was Jesus killed? Yes. By the Romans? Yes. By crucifixion? Yes. And so on).

The question is whether there are also *unreliable* stories found in these later narratives. And there again, apart from fundamentalists and very conservative evangelicals, scholars agree that the answer is yes.

TheBestSchools

Another point you emphasize in your books is that the historical Jesus cannot have thought of himself as equal to God, as is claimed by the late Gospel of John, because Judaism itself was not so strictly monotheistic as is usually supposed, and there was basically a continuum between men, heroes, kings, messiahs, demons, angels, and God.

This idea comes as a big surprise to many of us, who were raised on the idea of strict monotheism as the single most distinctive feature of Judaism. Could you explain briefly the reasons why the received view is in error?

Bart D. Ehrman

I'm not sure I understand the first paragraph: it wouldn't make sense to say that Jesus could not call himself equal with God if Judaism had a continuum of divinities. Why would that stop him from calling himself equal with God? I've never argued that and don't see how anyone could argue it. (I absolutely don't think the historical Jesus equated himself with God, as he is portrayed as doing in the Gospel of John, but for completely different reasons.)

So, I'll address the second paragraph. Yes, before I did my research on *How Jesus Became God*, I too thought that Jews should be thought of as strict monotheists. But I came to realize that it would depend on what one *means* by that. Judaism has lots of

supernatural beings who are not equal with God: angels, archangels, principalities, powers, and so on. Non-Jews in the ancient world would have considered these divine beings — superhuman spiritual entities that dwell in heaven. It turns out, most Jews thought of them in that way, as well.

Ancient people — including Jews — thought there were other divine beings, including some who were human!

It's not that any of these was equal with God. They were all created beings. But they were created *divine* beings. Ancient Jews even thought that *humans* could be made into divine beings. The Jewish philosopher, Philo, for example, thought that at the end of his life Moses was made into a god. Not God Almighty, of course, but a god nonetheless.

Even in the Hebrew Bible, humans could be called God. Think of Psalm 45, where God speaks to the king of Israel and says, “*Your throne, O God, is forever and ever*”; or Psalm 110 where we learn, again about the king, that “*The LORD said to my Lord, sit at my right hand...*” It seems weird to us because in our world virtually everyone is a monotheist, believing that there is only one God. But ancient people — including Jews — thought there were other divine beings, including some who were human!

TheBestSchools

One of the criticisms that have been directed against your work is that the “angelomorphic” view of Jesus you ascribe to the authors of the canonical Gospels (and which is part of the general “exaltation” framework) is guilty of committing an equivocation by ignoring different senses of the term “divine.”

That is, the New Testament authors predicate the Greek adjective *theios* of angels and of God in different senses. The latter is

“divine” in the primary sense of being the unique creator of the universe and proper object of worship. The former are “divine” only in the secondary sense that they are associated with God.

Jesus – so this critique goes – is clearly meant to be *theios* in the former sense (because, e.g., of the shared epithet *kurios* [Lord]), not the latter one.

What say you in response to this criticism?

Bart Ehrman

I’m not sure I understand the critique. I don’t think that the Gospels of the New Testament portray Jesus as an angel. And in my view the Gospels of the New Testament do portray Jesus as an object worthy of worship.

But let me just make a couple of clarifying remarks.

I do not think that Matthew, Mark, and Luke understood Jesus to have been the Creator of the world. They never say that, or hint at that. He *is* worthy of worship, though, since God exalted him to his heavenly throne at the resurrection.

The Gospel of John, on the other hand, does believe that “the Word” of God created the world. And the Word became incarnate as the man Jesus Christ. But it’s not quite right to say even for John that Jesus was the Creator of the world. Jesus did not exist, for John, until the Word became flesh. When it did so, it became the man Jesus. So, it was the Word that was the creator. And then the Word became flesh, the man Jesus. Only in *that* sense is Jesus associated with creation, as the incarnation of the Word that created all things.

TheBestSchools

Another issue to which you attach much significance is the existence of two very different traditions regarding the

resurrection: the empty tomb versus the appearances/visions. But to the layman, these two traditions (if that is what they are) appear to be perfectly compatible. Could you please explain to us why you believe the existence of these two traditions undermines the traditional orthodox view that both things really happened?

Bart Ehrman

No, that's not my view. I never argue that the empty tomb and the appearances somehow are incompatible and cancel each other out, or that they are in any way incompatible. My view instead is simply that they are two different traditions and it's important to recognize their differences. It has long been noted that the apostle Paul speaks of Jesus's appearances, but never mentions the story about the women going to the tomb and finding it empty. Strikingly, the Gospel of Mark tells the story about the women going to the tomb to find it empty, but never mentions any stories about Jesus's post-resurrection appearances.

In the Gospels (and Acts), the empty tomb functions to show that Jesus really was physically raised from the dead. But, strikingly, it never leads anyone to believe. (And why would it? If a body was buried in a tomb and later it was not there, would someone immediately say: "*He has been raised from the dead?*" Of course not. They would say: "*Grave robbers!*" Or, "*Hey, I'm at the wrong tomb!*")

On the other hand, the resurrection appearances function to show that Jesus really did come back to life. And it is these appearances, and only these appearances, that cause people to believe.

In my book *How Jesus Became God*, I show why it is difficult to establish historically that there really was an empty tomb; but I stress repeatedly that some of the disciples believed they saw Jesus

later, and on that basis they came to believe he had been raised and exalted to heaven.

TheBestSchools

Returning to an issue that is perhaps closer to philosophy – that of historical methodology – you are famous for having articulated a number of criteria by which a purported historical event must be tested in order for us to be justified in assigning to it a high probability of truth. Could you please summarize these important criteria for us?

Bart D. Ehrman

Ha! That's pretty funny if someone thinks I'm famous for articulating these historical criteria! These are criteria that all of us learned in graduate school back in the 1970s. Everyone studying NT in every major Ph.D. program in America and Europe learned these criteria. I had nothing to do with coming up with them!

There really shouldn't be much controversy about the criteria: they are simply rigorous formulations of what almost everyone would agree is common sense. Suppose you want to know if something happened in the past (say, you want to know what happened in a presidential debate, or what happened in a car accident).

Rule One: If you have lots of people who tell you basically the same story, and they have not collaborated with one another or with other shared sources of information, then that story is better established than a story told by only one person. (Since none of those telling it could have made it up, since then you couldn't explain how the others would know it: no collaboration!)

Rule Two: If a witness to the event says something about it that is contrary to what she or he would want to say, then that statement in particular is very likely right. Suppose a mother is on the witness stand and has to admit something that incriminates her much beloved son; she's probably telling the truth at that point – in contrast to saying something that exonerates him. It's NOT that a statement exonerating him is necessarily wrong. It's that a statement incriminating him is almost certainly right. It's important to recognize the difference.

Rule Three: If a detail simply makes no sense given what you know about the context of the event, then it's probably not plausible. For example, if someone tells you that Ted Cruz and Donald Trump in last night's debate started yelling at each other in Swahili, you simply wouldn't believe it. It isn't credible, based on what you know about their lives (neither of them, for example, having learned Swahili).

These same rules are what scholars (since I was in first grade) have regularly used to establish what Jesus really said and did. Are the traditions about his life found in numerous independent sources? Are any of the traditions dissimilar to the interests of those telling the story? Do any of them contradict what we otherwise know about his world and context?

TheBestSchools

One of your criteria – dissimilarity – has come under particularly harsh criticism. That is because it seems paradoxical if applied to other ancient writings, say, the Platonic corpus.

In that case, only descriptions of actions by Socrates that were dissimilar to the common notion of a philosopher's behavior (say, getting roaring drunk and making a pass at Alcibiades) would be considered reliable. All the other actions ascribed to Socrates which

comported well with the common notion (teaching the Pythagorean theorem to a slave boy) would be considered suspect. But that seems absurd.

How do you respond to such critics?

Bart D. Ehrman

Again, I'm a bit confused. I didn't make up these criteria! They've been around for over a half a century, and have been used by my multitudes of scholars. And they simply make sense. They are used for all historical work, not just the Gospels.

Yes, indeed, they are used with the Platonic corpus — in almost exactly the same way they are used with the Gospels. If you want to know what Socrates really said and did, you see if you have independent accounts (my Rule One: that, is, *Is Plato supported by Xenophon?*); you see if any comments by Socrates runs counter to what the author would have wanted him to say (Rule Two: e.g., in Aristophanes!); and you see if anything in the record is not contextually credible (Rule Three).

The criterion of dissimilarity is my Rule Two, and I'm afraid you've misstated it. The rule is NOT that something that "comported well with the common notion" is probably unhistorical. That's not the rule at all. The rule is that *if something does comport with the common notion, you can't use its dissimilarity to show that it probably happened*. That doesn't mean that it *didn't* happen. It means that this rule cannot be used to show that it *did* happen. So, you need to appeal to another rule (e.g., Rule One).

Dissimilarity is principally used in order to establish what almost certainly happened in the past. It is not used to show what *could not* have happened in the past. It gives you a core amount

of material that is historical. You use other criteria to give you yet more material.

TheBestSchools

Another point that critics raise with your methodology is its apparent inconsistency. For example, by your own criterion of dissimilarity it seems you ought to count the highly “paradoxical” claim some of the New Testament authors make that Jesus had a divine as well as human nature as a point in their favor.

Instead, you seem to set aside the dissimilarity criterion when it suits you, and say that because all the other itinerant apocalyptic Jewish preachers we know about from the ancient sources were considered human, the texts claiming Jesus to be divine must be mistaken.

What say you to the inconsistency charge?

Bart D. Ehrman

I guess I would say that I don’t understand the charge at all. I’ve never said anything like that. I really don’t mind if people disagree with what I say. But if they disagree with something that I’ve never said, how are they actually disagreeing with me?

With respect to the first paragraph of the question: a paradoxical view of Christ as both divine and human would decidedly NOT pass the criterion of dissimilarity. That was the view that virtually every Christian author we know of actually had. If so, how would an affirmation of that view be *dissimilar* to what they thought? It would be exactly what they did think.

With respect to the second paragraph, I never claim that Jesus must have been human because all other itinerant apocalyptic Jewish preachers were. Why would I argue that? It’s a silly argument.

These attacks on my views are simply straw men. I'm surprised anyone really makes them. Do they really? Well, I suppose they do!

TheBestSchools

Your basic line on the historical Jesus – that he was a human being who was later “deified” by the apostolic tradition – has been in existence for some 200 years, since the rise of German biblical criticism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries (e.g., David Strauss's *Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* [1835]).

Would you say that your position is very close to theirs — basically filling in details? Or would you say that we now know so much more about the textual and cultural context surrounding the New Testament writings that we have a significantly different view of the life of Jesus from theirs?

If the latter, what would you say is your own greatest contribution to this new knowledge?

Bart D. Ehrman

Strauss's book on the life of Jesus was an absolute classic, arguably the most important book on the topic from over the past 200 years (with Albert Schweitzer's book, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906) also vying for the spot). But its significance was not rooted in some kind of view of later Christology, but because it argued that the stories in the Gospels are not historical traditions, but later mythologized understandings of Jesus. The specific view that Strauss lays out is held by precisely no one, to my knowledge, today. But the basic idea is held by just about every NT scholar except for fundamentalists and very conservative evangelicals: **the Gospels contain stories that did not happen as they are narrated, but their ultimate point is not to give historical lessons about what transpired one year in first century Palestine; it is instead to deliver theological messages about who Jesus really is.**

So, that in very broad terms is also my view. The Gospels contain stories that are not historically accurate, but are intended to convey the author's religious understanding of Jesus. That is not only my view – it is view of virtually every biblical scholar who teaches at any major university in the country. (Take your pick: Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Duke, Emory, Vanderbilt, Texas, California, UCLA, Oregon, or, keep going – really, take your pick!)

But we know *so* much more than Strauss did about the Jewish world, the Roman empire, the history of Palestine, the manuscript tradition of the NT, the historical Jesus, and...

As to my own contributions: I write three kinds of books. Some books are hard-hitting scholarship for scholars — that is, for the six people in the world who really care. Others are textbooks for university/college students. And others are for adult general audiences. My contributions to scholarship are pretty much only in my scholarly books, starting with *Didymus the Blind and the Text of the Gospels* (Scholars' Press, 1987) (really!); to *The Orthodox Corruption of Scripture* (Oxford UP, 1993); to *Forgery and Counterforgery: The Use of Literary Deceit in Early Christian Polemics* (Oxford UP, 2012). My textbooks (on the New Testament; on the whole Bible; on early Christianity) do not try to develop and establish scholarship. They are meant to summarize scholarship for undergraduates, in an accessible and interesting way. And my books for general audiences try to do something different, in a very different format, for mature adults.

My major scholarly contributions are in fields of textual criticism (dealing with the ancient manuscripts of the NT and how they were altered); the use of literary forgery in antiquity; early Christian apocrypha and pseudepigrapha; and the apostolic fathers.

The BestSchools

To wind up this discussion, we would like you to tell us — in bulleted list format, if you like — what you consider to be the five strongest arguments in favor of your view that the New Testament presents a historically unreliable account of Jesus life, work, and teachings, and in particular that it provides no compelling evidence to think that Jesus rose bodily from the dead. Additionally, please lay out for us what you regard as the five weakest arguments that are commonly advanced by New Testament scholars like Michael Licona when they claim that the New Testament is broadly reliable and that its account of Jesus’s resurrection may be trusted.

Bart Ehrman

Ah, this is tricky. OK, in bullet point fashion, my main arguments:

Historians, by the nature of their craft, have no access to any activities of God. That is the purview of theologians. Historians do not have tools to access the supernatural. That’s no one’s fault. It’s just the way it is. Historians also have no way of establishing if a poem is beautiful, if I love my wife, if there is dark matter, if the Pythagorean theorem is true, or anything else outside the realm of “history” (please remember, “the past” is not synonymous with history). To believe in the resurrection of Jesus is a religious commitment. It is a belief. It is no more susceptible of historical “proof” than is the claim that there is only one God (or that there are two, or 24).

- The Bible does contain historically reliable information, but it also contains other information that is not reliable. There never really was a battle of Jericho where the “Walls came a tumblin’ down” (we know this because of archaeology). So, too, there are

things related in the Gospels that did not happen as narrated. Mike Licona agrees with this.

- The Gospels are riddled with historical problems – no matter how valuable they are as cherished documents of faith. There are flat-out contradictions and discrepancies, for example. If you have two accounts of the same event, they both cannot be historically accurate. And you have accounts like that all over the place in the Gospels, as anyone can see simply by reading stories in multiple Gospels and comparing the different accounts to one another in detail.

- The resurrection narratives themselves are riddled with these problems. Just compare them carefully with one another, line by line! Who went to the tomb on the third day? One woman? Several women? How many? Who were they? It depends on which Gospel you read. What/Whom did they see there? Depends which Gospel you read. Was the stone rolled away before they arrived or did it roll away once they got there? Depends on the Gospel. What were they told to do? Did they do it? Did they tell the disciples? Or not? Did the disciples see Jesus afterward? Where did they see him? And so on and on. If you don't believe me, just read Matthew's account and then Luke's (being sure to read not only Luke 24, but also Acts 1–2). Ask yourself: "Did the disciples immediately leave Jerusalem to go back up to Galilee to see Jesus? Or did they stay in Jerusalem and never leave?" If you had four witnesses at a trial who disagreed on virtually every detail – when they had all gotten the basic information from someone else – what would you think of their testimony?

- The reason there are so many differences (and similarities!) in the Gospels is that the stories they narrate were being told by word of mouth, year after year, decade after decade, after the disciples had

come to believe that Jesus had been raised. What happens to stories that get circulated this way? They change. People forget things. They misremember things. They invent things. Happens all the time. It happened to the stories of Jesus.

This is even trickier. I'm not sure what Mike is going to argue. Let me point out some arguments that I have heard that struck me as weak, with the proviso that he may not use them!

□ The New Testament can be trusted because we have so many manuscripts of it — far more than for any other book in the ancient world.

Response: It's true that we have far more manuscripts of the NT than for any other book. But that has ZERO bearing on whether you can trust it. The manuscripts are valuable for knowing what the authors wrote, not for knowing whether what they wrote is true. Think of it this way: We have FAR more copies of Mein Kampf than we have manuscripts of the New Testament. Does that mean that we can trust Mein Kampf? That what Hitler said is therefore true? Of course not. It simply means that we can be pretty sure that we know what he wrote.

□ The Gospels are reliable because there is so much consistency between Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Response: Yes indeed, these three Gospels agree a lot. But there's a really good reason for that, which scholars have known since the mid-nineteenth century, a reason I learned way back when I was a fundamentalist at Moody Bible Institute. They all had the same sources of information. More specifically, Matthew and Luke got most of their stories from Mark. They copied him and added stories to his account. So, of course they agree extensively with Mark. And with one another. How would they not? He gave them most of their narratives. But that has no bearing on whether the stories they tell are historically accurate or not.

□ The New Testament is repeatedly verified by archaeological evidence.

Response: Actually, that's not true. It is true to say that many parts of the New Testament show knowledge of first-century geography, religion, and culture. But how could it not show this knowledge? It was written by first-century authors! Presumably, they knew about the geography, religion, and culture of the first century! But that doesn't mean that what they say is historically accurate or not. Suppose I were to write a novel, or even a biography, about someone who lived in my home town of Lawrence, Kansas. Presumably, I would know about the main street (Massachusetts), the location of the university (on the hill), the basic size of the place (middlin'), the industries in the area (e.g., the Lawrence Paper Company), and so on. Would that make the stories I told about my protagonist true? Of course not. I could simply be making stuff up. If in 2,000 years an archaeologist digs up Lawrence in order to see if my novel is "true," well, the location of the university on a hill would have no bearing on whether my stories about a professor who taught at the university are true or not.

□ There are multiple evidences that all scholars would agree on that demonstrate that Jesus was raised from the dead — for example, that he was crucified by Pontius Pilate.

Response: You have to look VERY carefully and be VERY attentive when people start claiming that some things are evidence. Often, they pile up "evidence" to look like they have lots of proof. But look at each thing they claim. Is it any evidence at ALL??? The fact that Jesus was crucified is not and never can be evidence that he was raised. It can't even be a contributing factor to the question of whether he was raised. Many thousands of people were crucified in Jesus's day. Is the fact that they were crucified evidence that they were raised from the dead? Of course not. Dying is not evidence that you were brought back to life. Everyone dies. What does that have to do with the question of whether one of those who

died was raised? It has no bearing on the question (other than to say that if someone did not die, they could not be resurrected from the dead! But their death is not evidence that they were resurrected).

□ Included among the multiple evidences that all scholars would agree on that demonstrate that Jesus was raised from the dead is, for example, the fact that on the third day his tomb was empty.

Response: Actually, all scholars don't agree with this. I certainly don't. My reasons are complicated, but again they are not ones that I myself made up. Scholars before me also had doubts. Here is one thing to think about: We know what Romans did to crucified victims. The ancient sources tell us. They left them on the cross for several days to decompose and be subject to the ravages of time, elements, and scavengers. This was all part of the humiliation and punishment. Your body was publicly left to rot. This was to show what happens to anyone who opposes the power of Rome. Our evidence of this is unambiguous. Did Romans make an exception of Jesus? Why would they do that? Would it be because they knew that he was the Son of God? They didn't believe that. Would it be because someone (Joseph of Arimathea) asked nicely?

They didn't give a stuff. I know this cuts across what so many people think and assume, but historians have to look at our sources and come up with the most viable explanation, even if it is contrary to what we ourselves have always thought and wanted to believe. If Jesus was crucified by the Romans, he almost certainly was not given a decent burial that afternoon. If that's true ... well, there are rather radical implications. It would NOT mean he was not later raised from the dead. But it WOULD mean that the empty tomb stories (based on a burial by Joseph) are later legends.

TheBestSchools

Finally, could you please tell us a little bit about your future plans? For example, what book projects are you working on right

now? What topics do you want to explore over the next five or ten years?

Bart Ehrman

I have a *new book* coming out in three weeks (March 1, 2016) that I'm *very* excited about. It deals with a topic of relevance to this discussion. I have long been struck by the fact (which historians generally take to be a fact) that Jesus died around the year 30 CE, but the first surviving account of his life was not written until around 70 CE (the Gospel of Mark; Matthew and Luke were maybe 10–15 years later than that, and John may another 10–15 years after even that).

So, where did the Gospel writers get their stories of Jesus from? There are compelling reasons for thinking that the authors of our Gospels were not eyewitnesses to Jesus's life (none of them claims to be). They were living in different countries, in different communities, speaking different languages, decades later. And so how did they get their stories?

For nearly a century now, scholars have argued that they got their stories from the “oral tradition.” That is, people told and retold the stories, until the Gospel writers heard them and wrote them down.

Ehrman's Statement:

The New Testament Gospels Are Historically Unreliable Accounts of Jesus

For this assignment I have been asked to argue the following thesis: *The New Testament Gospels are not a reliable historical guide to the life, work and teachings of Jesus.* In particular, they provide no convincing evidence for the bodily resurrection of Jesus.

This thesis sounds terribly negative, but I want to start on a very positive note. Let me say here at the outset that I consider the Gospels of the New Testament to be four of the most beautiful, powerful, moving, and inspiring books ever written. I love the Gospels. Their stories of Jesus's words and deeds have always been and always will be near and dear to me. Among other things, I have always strived to make the values they promote and the ethics they teach the center of my moral life, and I encourage others to do likewise. For me they are the most important books in our civilization and for my own life.

That does not mean that I think they are always historically accurate. On the contrary, even though they do contain valuable historical information about Jesus's life and death, they also contain a good deal of material that is non-historical. It is my task in this writing assignment to show why I think that is.

I should stress that the views I lay out here are not unique to me, as if I'm the one who thought all this up. On the contrary, the views I will be laying out here are those held by virtually every professor of biblical studies who teaches at every major liberal arts college or research university in North America. Take your pick: Yale, Harvard, Princeton, Berkeley, University of Chicago, University of

Kansas, University of Nebraska, University of Minnesota, University of Florida, Amherst, Middlebury, Oberlin — literally, pick any top liberal arts college or state university in North America, and the views that I will be sketching here are pretty much the sorts of things you will find taught there.

I want to stress this point because it is important to know that these are not the idiosyncratic ideas of some radical liberal professor with crazy ideas. These are the views shared by critical scholars around the country (and in Europe) who have devoted their lives to studying such things.

How the Gospels Have Been Understood Throughout History

That has not always been the case, however. If I were to try to lay out the history of scholarship on the Gospels in a highly succinct and compact way, I would say that it has gone through three stages.

Stage One: The Gospels as Supernatural Histories

The first stage involved the study of the Gospels before the Enlightenment. Prior to the eighteenth century, every scholar who studied the Bible maintained that the stories of the Gospels were what we might call “supernatural histories.” Both words in that term are important. First, the Gospels are “supernatural,” that is, they contain numerous stories that are so remarkable that they would require the miraculous activity of God. The Gospels are full of miracles from beginning to end. Jesus’s life begins with a miracle: his mother is, in fact, a virgin. Jesus’s ministry is one miracle after the other, as he heals the sick, casts out demons, walks on the water, feeds the multitudes with five loaves and two fishes, calms the storm with a word, and raises the dead. At the end comes the biggest miracle of all: after he is dead and buried, God raises Jesus

from the dead and exalts him to heaven, where he now dwells until the time when he will return to the earth in judgment.

The Gospels are obviously full of supernatural stories. And for scholars prior to the Enlightenment, these stories were actual events of history. They really happened. If you had been there, you would have been able to record them with your video camera (not that there were video cameras before the Enlightenment, but still...)

Now, I'm not saying that this older view of biblical scholars is no longer anyone's views! Quite the contrary, the idea that the Gospels are supernatural histories continues to be the assumption of most Christians today, including many (but not all) Christian scholars, especially fundamentalists and conservative evangelicals, even if other scholars have other views (as we will see).

Stage Two: The Gospels as Natural Histories

The second stage in this history of the study of the Gospels happened during the Enlightenment, when scholars began to think about and look at the world very differently. In the Enlightenment thinkers in Europe began to break free of the authority imposed by the Christian church and to develop new, rational ways of engaging in intellectual activity. The sciences were on the rise, and scholars began to realize that one does not need to appeal to the activities of God to explain the events of the world. Lightning strikes, floods, and droughts were no longer thought of as direct interventions of God into the world; they were seen as naturally occurring climactic conditions.

Medicine was developed, and proved to be much more efficient in solving human illness than prayer and hope. Astronomy developed and people came to realize that the earth was not the center of the universe. Eventually, scientists realized that the world was not

created in six days and that humans were not simply created out of the dust, but evolved from lower forms of primates, which were themselves evolved from yet other forms of life.

The emphasis during the Enlightenment was on the possibility of human reason to understand our world and the nature of life in it. We can all be endlessly grateful that these developments occurred. We now have ways of dealing with everything from toothache to polio to potential crop failure to massive starvation to ... to literally thousands of things that earlier people could not control at all.

This decision to use human reason to understand the world was applied by biblical scholars to the accounts of Scripture. If we no longer needed to appeal to “miracle” to explain why we got over the flu, or why it finally rained last week, or why the solar system was formed, do we need to appeal to miracle to understand the Gospels?

Some scholars of the Enlightenment thought that the answer was No. In their view, the Gospels do not contain Supernatural Histories, but what we might call “natural histories.” Before explaining this view, let me stress that there are very few scholars today who hold to this opinion (of all the hundreds of biblical scholars I personally know, I don’t know of anyone who does). But in the early nineteenth century, this became a common view in scholarly circles. It maintained that the Gospels do contain historical accounts of things that happened. But the things that happened were not miraculous, since these Enlightenment scholars did not think we needed to appeal to the miraculous in order to explain what happens in the world. Instead, the events narrated in the Gospels were non-miraculous, “natural” events that were simply misinterpreted by the followers of Jesus (who were obviously not influenced by the Enlightenment) to have been miraculous, supernatural events.

To explain how the view worked, I might mention one of the great Enlightenment scholars in the field of biblical studies, a German scholar named Heinrich Paulus, whose most important book was called *The Life of Jesus* (1828) (German title: *Das Leben Jesu*). Paulus went story by story through the Gospels in order to show that what the disciples mistakenly thought or described as a miracle was in fact a natural occurrence. Let me illustrate with three examples, just so you can get a feel for how it worked.

In the Gospels Jesus is said to have fed the multitudes with just a few loaves of bread and a couple of fish. Jesus is said to have been teaching the crowds — Mark's Gospel says there were 5,000 men there, not counting the women and children. So, let's say 15,000 people altogether. The disciples come to Jesus and tell him the crowds are hungry, he should send them home so they can eat. He tells the disciples that they themselves should feed them. The disciples are incredulous: how can they possibly feed this vast multitude? Jesus asks them how much food they have. It's not much: five loaves and two fishes. He tells them to have the crowd all sit in groups of fifty and a hundred. They do so, and Jesus takes the bread, gives thanks, breaks it in pieces, and starts giving it to the disciples, who distribute it to the groups of people. He does the same thing with the fish. And the food just keeps coming. Eventually there is enough for everyone. And there are basketfuls left over.

Now, scholars before the Enlightenment (just as many people still today) would have described this as a "supernatural history," an event that really took place (history), which is nonetheless obviously miraculous (supernatural). But Heinrich Paulus did not believe in the supernatural. In his view something really happened (it was history), but not a great miracle. It was a natural event that was later misinterpreted.

But what was the event? Paulus argued that what actually happened was this: The disciples tell Jesus to allow the multitudes to go home to eat. Jesus instead tells them to have every one sit and to bring him what little food they themselves have on hand. They do so and he breaks the bread and fish and starts handing it out. When he does this, everyone else looking on sees that it's time for lunch. And so they break out their own picnic baskets and start sharing their food with one another. By the time it's all over, there is more than enough food to go around.

Only later, looking back on that great afternoon, did someone say *"You remember that day when Jesus was teaching us, and we were all hungry and...? That was a great day. A spectacular day. In fact, that was a miraculous day."* And so the story started up that a miracle had happened that day. But in fact it was not a supernatural event, but a natural one, that only later was misinterpreted as an actual miracle. (Again, I'm not saying that I — or anyone else I know — think this is what really happened; but it was a popular kind of view in the early nineteenth century.)

Or take a second example: After Jesus feeds and dismisses the multitudes, he tells his disciples to take their boat and go to the other side of the Sea of Galilee (which is in fact merely a lake, as you will see if you ever visit Israel), while he stays on shore to pray. It is nighttime, and in the dark the disciples head off across the lake, but a mighty storm arises and as they row they are making no headway. When Jesus finishes his prayer he looks up and sees them struggling, and he begins to walk out to them, on top of the water. The disciples, in a boat in the middle of the lake, see him and are terrified. They think it is a ghost. Jesus tells them "No, it is I." In Matthew's Gospel, the head disciple Peter (who is always saying ridiculous things) says, "Lord if it is you, let me come to you." Jesus gives his permission and Peter hops out of the boat and begins

walking toward him on the water. But then he looks around and sees the wind and waves and realizes what he's doing, and he begins to sink. Jesus reaches out a hand and rebukes him, "Oh, you of little faith!" They then get in the boat and arrive at their destination.

Those who hold to the Gospels as supernatural histories would simply say that the walking on the water was an event that really and truly happened, a miraculous occurrence. But Heinrich Paulus could not see it that way. For him it was, again, a natural event that was simply misunderstood. This is how it worked. Recall, we are told that the event took place at night, after it was dark. The disciples set out in their boat, but can make no headway because of the violent storm that had arisen. In Paulus's view, they literally had made no headway. They had never gotten off the shore. They didn't know this, of course, since it was dark and rainy and they couldn't see. They thought they were in the middle of the lake. Wrong. Jesus finished praying and seeing that they were getting nowhere came to them, wading through the water on the shore. Since they think they are already halfway across the lake, they are terrified and cry out. But Jesus tells them not to be afraid, it is just he. Peter wants to know if he can come to him. Jesus, somewhat surprised, says "Of course." Peter hops out of the boat, but begins to flounder around, thinking that he is trying to walk on the water. Jesus grabs his hand and helps him up, and pulls the boat to shore.

This, in other words, was not a miraculous event, but a rather ordinary one that was simply misunderstood, a natural history rather than a supernatural one.

So, that might work for some of the miracles Jesus did, but what about the biggest miracle of all, his resurrection from the dead? In the Gospels Jesus is found guilty of treason against the state (calling himself the "King of the Jews"), is flogged within an inch of

his life, is crucified, dies, and is buried. On the third day the women go to where he was buried and find the stone rolled away from the tomb. Jesus is not there. He later appears to them and then to the disciples. He has been raised from the dead. How could one possibly give a “natural” explanation for such an obviously supernatural event?

As you might imagine, Paulus has a way. Paulus stresses that before Jesus was crucified he was flogged nearly to death. Hanging, then, on the cross, his body was put under the most severe stress. And for Paulus, at that point something truly significant happened. Jesus went into a coma. His vital signs slowed down. It looked like he stopped breathing, and that his heart stopped beating. They thought he was dead. A soldier wanted to make sure and plunged a spear into his side, serving, according to Paulus, the medical purpose of a “bloodletting,” which started the process of healing (remember: in the early nineteenth century one of the ways to heal an illness was for the doctor to cause a bleeding). The soldiers assumed he had died; he was taken from the cross and laid in a grave; and, after a while, in the cool of the tomb, with the smell of the ointments, he awoke. He arose, rolled the stone from the entrance of the tomb, and appeared to his followers.

And what were they supposed to think? They had seen him dead. And now he was alive, no longer in his tomb. They assumed he had been raised back from life. But Jesus had not, in fact, been resurrected, because Jesus had never died.

That was the theory of Paulus. You could probably poke a ton of holes in it. But that was one of the two views that virtually everyone had of the Gospels in the early nineteenth century. They either thought that the Gospels were supernatural histories, or that they were natural histories.

Stage Three: The Gospels as Non-Historical Myths

All that changed in 1835–36 with the publication of one of the most important books in biblical studies ever to be written, by another German scholar, named David Friedrich Strauss. The book was called *The Life of Jesus Critically Examined* (1835). This would then be the third stage in the history of biblical scholarship.

Strauss wanted to argue that *both* previous ways of looking at the Gospels were wrong. The Gospels were not supernatural histories and they were not natural histories. That's because the Gospels were not histories at all. For Strauss, they were myths.

Now, before you reject that view as being a bit crazy, it is important to know what Strauss meant by the term “myth,” since what he meant by it is not what most people today mean by it. Today, people often think of myth as a story that is not true. But not for Strauss. Strauss maintained that a myth *was* true. For him, a myth was a true story that didn't happen.

What? If a story didn't happen, how can it be true? In fact, I would argue that all of us hold to true stories that didn't happen. Here's the example I often give my students. Most of us, when we were young, heard the story of George Washington and the Cherry Tree. Young George is given a hatchet for a present, and he somewhat unwisely uses it to chop down his father's favorite cherry tree. When his father comes home, he angrily asks, “Who chopped down my cherry tree?” And young George tells him, “I cannot tell a lie. I did it.”

Parents and school teachers continue to tell that story today. But we know for a fact it didn't happen. There is no dispute about this. The man who made up the story, a biographer of Washington named Mason Locke Weems [generally known as “Parson Weems”], admitted that he invented the story. (He invented other

stories, as well. Among other things, he falsely claimed that he had been Washington's pastor. These inventions came from a man who made up the story about how "I cannot tell a lie"!)

So, if we know the story about the cherry tree didn't happen, why do we tell it? We tell it because we appreciate the "truth" that it conveys. For example, with respect to our country, it shows that the Father of this country was an honest man, one who would never lie. How honest was he? Well, one time when he was a boy.... This country is founded on honesty! Moreover, many people tell the story because they think it teaches an important lesson in personal ethics. If you do something wrong, you should just admit it and not compound the problem by lying about it. This is a lesson we want our children to learn. It is important never to lie. It is a true story. But it didn't happen.

According to Strauss, the Gospels are full of stories like that, stories that didn't happen (they aren't histories), but that attempt to tell the truth about Jesus. Strauss's term for that kind of story can be off-putting for people today, since it's a bit hard for anyone to say the New Testament is full of myths. And so scholars today describe the phenomenon that Strauss has in mind by using other kinds of terminology. But the basic idea that he advanced is one that is very widely held today among critical scholars of the New Testament. The Gospels contain stories that did not literally happen. We know that for reasons I will be laying out in a second. But just because they didn't happen in history does not mean that they cannot be "true" in some other sense. They may be an attempt by the author to convey a "truth" about Jesus that is important for his understanding of him.

Do the Gospels Contain Stories that Cannot Be Historically Accurate?

Let me explain how all this works by taking just one example out of a huge number of possibilities. This is a story that simply cannot be historically accurate the way it is narrated, but that is attempting to convey a true understanding of Jesus (in the view of the author). The example has to do with the death of Jesus as it is narrated in the Gospel of John.

First, let me stress a point that I will be making a bit more fully later: the Gospels certainly do contain historically important information about Jesus, especially when it comes to the very broad outlines of what he said, did, and experienced. With respect to the death of Jesus, for example, there are very good reasons indeed (that I have spelled out at length in some of my books, if you're really interested) for being relatively certain that Jesus went from his home country of Galilee to the city of Jerusalem (about 100 miles away from where he spent his public ministry) the last week of his life in order to celebrate the Passover meal; that there he aroused the anger of the Jewish leaders and Roman authorities; he was arrested, put on trial by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate; found to be guilty of treason against the state; and crucified. That basic story is reported in all the Gospels, and I think it is almost certainly right. But many of the details of the Gospel accounts cannot be right.

To make sense of what I want to say, I have to explain just a little bit of historical background. It is important to know what the Passover feast of the Jews was all about as the context within which Jesus made his last fateful trip to Jerusalem.

Passover was (and is) an annual Jewish festival celebrating the greatest event in the history of the ancient Israelites, their

deliverance by God, through Moses, from their slavery in Egypt. You can find the story in the Old Testament in the book of Exodus. We are told that the people of Israel had migrated down to Egypt to escape a famine in the Promised Land. In Egypt they became a numerous people, and out of a fear of their numbers, the Egyptians enslaved them. The children of Israel had been in Egypt for 400 years when God finally heard their cries and raised up for them a savior, Moses. Moses was empowered by God to do miracles against the Egyptians in order to convince the ruler, Pharaoh, to let the people go.

The last of the ten great miracles was the “death of the first born.” God was to send the angel of death to kill every first-born child in the land to convince the Pharaoh that he, God, meant business. Moses was instructed to have every Israelite family sacrifice a lamb, and to spread the blood of the lamb on the doorposts and lintel of their house. Then, when the angel of death came, he would “pass over” their houses to those without the blood to kill their first born. They Israelites all did so, and it happened. Throughout the land there were massive deaths. Pharaoh realized that he was dealing with an implacable power and sent the people away; they made a hasty escape. Pharaoh then had second thoughts and chased them to the Red Sea. God did then another great miracle, parting the waters of the Red Sea for the Israelites, but bringing the waters back with a vengeance in order to drown the Egyptian army. This then was the Exodus event.

Hundreds of years later, in the days of Jesus, the Passover was celebrated by Jews throughout the world, but especially in the city of Jerusalem. Jerusalem was where the temple of the Jews was, the only place where animal sacrifice could be practiced. At the Passover pilgrims from around the world would arrive, a week early, in order to prepare for the celebration, which involved a

special meal in which the Jewish households would eat a lamb and a number of other symbolic foods, including unleavened bread and several cups of wine.

Now, here is the only tricky part of this historical background. It is important (crucial!) to recall the traditional Jewish reckoning of time. For Jews, the new day begins not at midnight (as for most of the rest of us), but when it *gets dark*. That's why, even today, the Jewish "Sabbath" dinner is eaten Friday night, even though Sabbath is on Saturday. The beginning of the new day comes when the stars come out.

So too in Jesus's day. The final preparations for the Passover meal were done after noon on the "Day of Preparation for the Passover." The lambs were slaughtered, taken home, and cooked; all the other foods were purchased and assembled; all things were made ready. Then, when it became dark, the next day was begun, the day of Passover itself, starting with the Passover meal.

Now we can get to the Gospels and their accounts of Jesus's death. Our earliest Gospel is Mark's (written about 70 CE — that is, about 40 years after the events it narrates). In Mark, the disciples ask Jesus "Where do you want us to prepare the Passover for us" (Mark 14:12). He gives them their instructions, and so, on this day of "Preparation," they get everything ready. That evening, after it gets dark, they eat with Jesus the Passover meal. He takes the symbolic bread and breaks it, instilling yet greater symbolism in it: "This is my body." He takes a cup of wine and instills greater symbolism: "This is my blood of the covenant." After they finish eating the meal, they go to the Garden of Gethsemane, where Jesus prays until the betrayer Judas Iscariot comes with the troops and he is arrested. Jesus spends the night in jail, is put on trial early the next morning, is condemned, and is then crucified at 9:00 am, on the

day of Passover, the morning after he had eaten the meal (Mark 15:25). That's Mark's version.

Our final Gospel to be written was John (possibly around 90–95 CE, some 20 years or so after Mark, and about 60–65 years after the death of Jesus). Here, too, Jesus goes to Jerusalem for the Passover. Here, too, he eats a last meal with his disciples (John 13–17). But in this account the disciples never ask Jesus where he wants them to prepare for the Passover meal, and the meal is not described as a Passover meal. Moreover, in John Jesus does not take the Passover foods of bread and cup and instill any new significance in them. It's just a meal. Afterward, Jesus goes out to pray, he's arrested, spends the night in jail, is put on trial, and is condemned to be crucified. And we're told exactly when this took place: "And it was the Day of Preparation for the Passover, about noon" (John 19:14).

The Day of *Preparation* for the Passover? How could it be the "Day of Preparation for the Passover"? According to Mark's Gospel, Jesus lived through that day, had the disciples prepare the Passover, and that night ate the Passover meal, only to be crucified the next morning at 9:00 am (not after noon). What's going on here?

What's going on here is that John cannot be historically accurate if Mark is historically accurate. In John Jesus dies the afternoon *before* the Passover meal was eaten, when preparations were underway for the meal that evening; in the earlier account of Mark, Jesus actually ate the meal with his disciples that evening and was killed the next day.

It may seem like a small detail, and in many ways it is. But why the difference? Scholars have long known the answer to that question. It all has to do with a "truth" that John is trying to

convey. He has changed a historical datum in order to convey this truth.

Here's the deal. John's Gospel is the only one in which Jesus is said to be "the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (spoken two times: John 1:29 and 35). For John, Jesus himself is like the Passover lamb. Just as the lamb represented the salvation of God that he brought about at the Exodus, so too Jesus is the lamb — the one who brings the even greater salvation, not from slavery, but from sin. For John's Gospel, Jesus is himself the Passover lamb whose death brings salvation.

And when does Jesus die, in John's Gospel? He dies on the same day the Passover lambs are being slaughtered in the Temple. These sacrifices in that time were begun after noon. And so John indicates that Jesus was killed after noon, on the Day of Preparation for the Passover.

John, in other words, has changed the story to make his point. If Mark's account is accurate, John's cannot be (and *vice versa*). But that's not ultimately the point. For John, the point is not a history lesson of something that took place one Spring day in 30 CE. The point is that Jesus is the lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world. John has changed the story to make it less historically accurate, but more theologically correct (in his view).

Initial Conclusion: Non-Historical Accounts in the Gospels

David Friedrich Strauss would say that the Gospels are chock *full* of those kinds of stories, stories that are not and cannot be historically accurate. This particular example I have given involves just a tiny little detail (which day Jesus died on, and at what time of day). And you might think, "Who Cares?" Well, John cared. And the reason it matters is because this kind of thing happens all over the place in the Gospels. And — this is a VERY big "And" — in

many, many places the non-historical aspects of the Gospels involve not simply tiny little details, but very large parts of stories and entire stories themselves.

To show that this is the case would take far more time and space than I have here. For anyone interested, I'd suggest that you start with my book *Jesus Interrupted* (HarperOne, 2009), where I go into this matter at great and considerable length. And even there, I am also simply scratching the surface.

Before explaining the matter a bit further and then turning to the stories of Jesus's resurrection, let me make two fundamental points about the Gospels that are important to understand when discussing their historical accuracy.

Even though we continue to call the Gospels "Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John," we do not know who the authors actually were. Each of the Gospels is completely anonymous: their authors never announce their names. The titles we read in the Gospels (e.g., "The Gospel according to Matthew") were not put there by their authors, but by later scribes who wanted to tell you who, in their opinion, wrote these books. But for well over a century scholars have realized that these opinions are almost certainly wrong. The followers of Jesus were uneducated, lower-class, Aramaic-speaking peasants from rural Galilee; these books, however, were written by highly educated and well trained, Greek-speaking, elite Christians living in cities in other locations. They were not eyewitnesses to the events they describe, and do not ever claim to be.

Where then did they get their stories? This is the second point to stress. For nearly 100 years scholars have realized that the Gospel writers acquired their stories about Jesus from the "oral tradition," that is, from the stories about Jesus's life, words, deeds, death, and resurrection that had been in circulation by word of

mouth, in all the years from the time of his death. The Gospels were written between 70–95 CE — that is 40 to 65 years after the events they narrate. This means that the Gospel writers are recording stories that had been told and retold month after month, year after year, decade after decade, among Christians living throughout the Roman empire, in differing places, in different times, even in different languages.

My most recent book, *Jesus Before the Gospels* (HarperOne, 2016), explains what appears to have happened to these stories that had been in oral circulation for all those years before any of our authors wrote them down. The stories changed. Sometimes in little ways (as in the date of Jesus's death) and sometimes in enormous ways. How could they not change? Think about it for a second. In the Gospel of Matthew we have the famous "Sermon on the Mount." It is one of the best known and most beloved set of ethical teachings the planet has ever seen. It takes up fully three chapters of the Gospel (it is not found in any of the other three). But Matthew was writing his account some 50 years or so after the sermon was allegedly given. How would he know what was said?

Give it some thought. Suppose you were supposed to write down a speech that you yourself had listened to a while ago. Suppose it was a speech delivered by a presidential candidate last month. If you had no notes, but just your memory---how well would you do? Or suppose you wanted to write down, without notes, Obama's first "State of the Union" address? That was only seven years ago. How well would you do? How well would you do with the first "State of the Union" addressed delivered by Lyndon Johnson? My guess is that you wouldn't have a clue.

We always learned that ... in cultures where there is no writing, people remember things better, since they more or less have to. ... I can tell you the claim is bogus.

When I was in graduate school, we always learned that it was completely different in oral cultures. That in cultures where there is no writing, people remember things better, since they more or less have to. I believed that for years — until I decided to see if there was any research that could back up that claim. I have now read extensively in this research, and I can tell you the claim is bogus. You can read the research for yourself; it is all very interesting.

Since the 1920s cultural anthropologists have studied oral cultures extensively, in a wide range of contexts (from Yugoslavia to Ghana to Rwanda to ... many other places). What this scholarship has consistently shown is that our unreflective assumptions about oral cultures are simply not right. When people pass along traditions in such cultures, they think the stories are supposed to change, depending on the context, the audience, the point that the story-teller wants to make, and so on. In those cultures, there is no sense at all that stories should be repeated the same, verbatim. They change all the time, each and every time, always in little ways and quite often in massive ways.

The early Christians were passing along the stories of Jesus by word of mouth. They changed them. Sometimes, in the details. Sometimes, in more significant ways. These are the stories that have come down to us once they were written in the Gospels.

Evidence that Gospel Stories Were Changed (or Even Invented): Discrepancies in the Gospels

But how do we *know* that the stories have changed? That there are parts of stories — or entire stories — that are not historically accurate? We know this for two reasons: because there are

abundant discrepancies among our stories, and because a number of the stories can be shown to be historically completely implausible.

First, let me mention some discrepancies — not an exhaustive list of them (that would take an entire book), but just a couple of examples to give you the idea. If you read the Gospels carefully enough, you'll find plenty yourself. The way to do it involves a different method of reading the Gospels from how we normally read them. Normally, we read a passage here or there, as we choose. Sometimes, we read the Gospels straight through, from beginning to end. Both ways of reading the Gospels are perfectly great and fine. But there is another way to read them. I call it a "horizontal" reading. This is when you put two Gospels next to each other, on the same page as it were, and read a story in one of them and then the same story in the other. If they were printed on the same page, you could literally do this horizontally; but you can simply read an account in, say, Mark, and then the same account in Luke, and do a point-by-point comparison that way. It's very easy to do.

When you do it, you start to find irreconcilable differences among the Gospels. Do it — just to pick an example — with the story of Jairus's daughter in Mark 5:21–43 and Matthew 9:18–26. In Mark, the man Jairus comes up to Jesus and tells him that his daughter is very sick, near to death. Could he come heal her? Before Jesus can get there, though, he is delayed by someone else who needs to be healed, and while he is taking care of this other person, people from Jairus's household come and tell him that now it is too late, the girl has already died. Jesus tells Jairus not to fear, but only believe, and he goes and raises the girl from the dead. Fantastic story.

Matthew has the story, as well, but in his account when Jairus comes to Jesus he does not say the girl is very sick. He comes to

inform Jesus that the girl has died. Could he come and raise her from the dead? And Jesus goes and does so.

Again, this is a small detail, but think about it. It's rather serious. There is a big difference between being very sick and being dead. Imagine a father who learns that his child has been taken to the hospital as opposed to learning that his child has died. Huge difference. It can't very well be both. Someone has changed the story. (Presumably, Matthew changed it, since it is widely thought that he was using Mark as his source.)

There are lots and lots of detailed differences like this that you will find once you start reading the Bible horizontally. Just take another seemingly small instance. In Mark's Gospel, at his Last Supper, Jesus informs Peter that he, Peter, will deny Jesus that evening three times "before the cock crows twice" (Mark 14:30). In Matthew we have the same scene, but here Jesus tells Peter that he will deny him three times "before the cock crows" (Matthew 26:34). Well, which is it? Is it before the cock crows or before it crows the second time? Again, it seems like a picayune detail: but why the difference? What is more interesting (and possibly important), is that in the different Gospels Peter actually denies Jesus to *different* people on different occasions. So, what is going on?

When I was in college I bought a book called *The Life of Christ in Stereo*, by Johnston M. Cheney (Multnomah Publishing, 1984), in which the author tried to reconcile all these differences by producing one mega-Gospel out of the four of the New Testament, creating one large narrative with all the details found in one or another of the Gospels. And what happens to the denials of Peter in this inventive book? Here, we learn that Peter actually denied Jesus six times: three times before the cock crowed the first time and three more times before it crowed the second! This is an interesting

(and rather amusing) solution to the problem, but it ends up meaning that what really happened is precisely what *none* of the Gospels actually says!

Now, I know some of you are reading these instances of discrepancies and are not at all impressed. These are such little, minor differences. What's the big deal? I have two responses to that: the first is, that I'm just giving you a couple of small details to make the point; there are very large differences as well, as we will see in a second. But the second is that small details matter a lot in many parts of our lives. If you were reading about a murder investigation in which detectives were arguing about a fingerprint which could solve the case, would you say, "It doesn't matter! It's just a tiny thing! It's just a *fingerprint!*"? Of course not. Often the tiniest piece of evidence can help you solve a case. So, too, with history. The small things sometimes have huge implications.

But as I've said, some of the discrepancies are much larger. As a very famous example: when did Jesus cleanse the temple? In the earliest Gospel, the last week of Jesus's life he travels to Jerusalem, enters the temple, is disgusted by what he sees there, drives out the money changers and those selling sacrificial animals, and declares that this was to be a place of prayer, but they have made it a "den of robbers" (Mark 11:15–19). This is pretty dramatic stuff. And it led to a dramatic end. It was because of this act that the Jewish authorities decided that Jesus had to be destroyed. Within a week he was dead.

You have the account of Jesus cleansing the temple in the Gospel of John, as well. But here it is not one of the last public acts Jesus engages in. In fact, it's one of the very first things he does, at the beginning of a three-year ministry (John 2:13–22). How could it take place here at the beginning if in Mark it takes place at the end?

Virtually the only way to reconcile the two is to say that Jesus cleansed the temple *twice*, once at the beginning of his ministry and once at the end (which is kind of like saying that Peter denied Jesus six times!). But if he did it at the beginning, then why wasn't he arrested *then*? I don't think there's a good answer to that question. John seems to have changed the account. Just as he did with the date of Jesus's death (before or after the Passover — see my comments at the beginning).

If witnesses to an event change their story, do you consider them reliable?

Sometimes, the differences among the Gospels are far larger and fundamental. Let me give just one example that I explain at length in my recent book *How Jesus Became God* (HarperOne, 2015). In the Gospel of John — just to stick with this account — Jesus spends almost his entire preaching ministry explaining who he is. This does not happen in Matthew, Mark, or Luke. In those Gospels, Jesus rarely speaks about himself, except to say that he must go to Jerusalem to be rejected by the Jewish leaders, crucified, and then raised from the dead. In those earlier Gospels, Jesus spends the bulk of his time preaching that God's Kingdom is soon to arrive, and explaining both what the kingdom will be like and what people must do in preparation for its appearance.

In John, however, Jesus's preaching is almost entirely about his own identity. Here he makes the most breathtaking claims about himself, repeatedly claiming to be God, to the dismay of his Jewish listeners who regularly take up stones to execute him for blasphemy. You don't find anything like that in the public ministry of Jesus in the other Gospels. But here in John, Jesus says such things as "Before Abraham was, I am" (Abraham lived 1,800 years earlier! John 8:58); "I and the Father are one" (10:30); "If you have

seen me you have seen the Father” (14:9). Here, Jesus speaks of the glory that he shared with the Father before the world was created (17:5).

These are spectacular passages, all of them. But did the man Jesus, during his life, actually say such things about himself? Here is a point worth considering. The other three Gospels, Matthew, Mark, and Luke, are all considered to be based on earlier sources. Scholars call these earlier sources Q (a source used by both Matthew and Luke for many of their sayings of Jesus), M (a source used just by Matthew), and L (a source used just by Luke). All of these sources were written much earlier than John, much nearer the time of Jesus’s public ministry. What is striking is that in precisely none of these sources or Gospels does Jesus make the exalted claims for himself that you find in John. You will not find these claims in Mark, Q, M, L, Matthew, or Luke.

So, here is the question. If the historical Jesus actually went around claiming that he was God on earth, is there anything else that he could possibly say that would be more significant? That would be the most amazing thing he could conceivably say. And if so, it would certainly be what someone who was recording his words would want their readers to know about him. If that’s the case, how do we explain the fact that such sayings are not found in any of our earlier sources? It’s not simply that one or the other of them chose not to give these sayings. Precisely none of them give them. But these would be the most amazing things that Jesus ever said. Did all six of these earlier authors simply decide not to mention that part? All of them?

The more likely explanation is that Jesus did not actually say such things. Otherwise, they would have been reported. When Jesus says these things in John, it’s because John is putting these words

on his lips. You may certainly think that the words of Jesus in John are theologically true, that in fact Jesus was God on earth. But historically, these are probably not things Jesus himself actually said.

Evidence that Gospel Stories Were Changed (or Even Invented): General Implausibilities

I have spent a good deal of time talking about discrepancies among the Gospels. There is one other reason for thinking that in places they are not historically accurate. That is because they occasionally tell stories that are completely implausible historically. Here, I have time (and space) to give only one example. This time I will refer to the Gospel of Luke and one of its most familiar stories, involving the birth of Jesus.

According to Luke's version of Jesus's birth (found in chs. 1–2), his mother Mary was a virgin who had been made pregnant by the Holy Spirit. She and her betrothed, Joseph, were from the town of Nazareth (up in the northern part of Israel, about 65 miles from the capital, Jerusalem). But even though they were from there, and Jesus was raised there, he actually was born in the village of Bethlehem (near Jerusalem, in the south). We learn from another Gospel, Matthew, why it was absolutely necessary for Jesus to be born in Bethlehem, even if he actually "came" from somewhere else (Nazareth): It's because of an Old Testament prophecy that said a savior would come from Bethlehem, the city of King David (whose descendant was to be the messiah — see Micah 5:2; quoted in Matthew 2:5–6).

But why would Jesus have been born somewhere other than where his parents lived? This is where Luke's story picks up. Luke indicates that during the reign of Caesar Augustus, when Quirinius was the governor of Syria, and Herod was the king of Israel, there

was a census that required “all the world” to be registered. Normally, in the ancient world a census was instituted to register people for taxes. This would be an enormous program of taxation indeed, if the whole world had to register for it! But I suppose we are to imagine that this is a census only of the Roman Empire (not China, for example). Still, for Luke it was a very big deal.

Joseph has to register for the census not in Nazareth, where he lived, but in Bethlehem, because he was “from the lineage of David,” and that’s where King David had been born. And so Joseph takes his pregnant espoused, Mary, to Bethlehem to register, and it turns out, while they were there, Mary went into labor and delivered her child, Jesus. So, Jesus was born in Bethlehem, even though he came from Nazareth. Luke then indicates that eight days later, Jesus was circumcised and 33 days later, after Mary performed the “rites of purification” (this is in reference to a law in the Old Testament, Leviticus 12), they returned back to Nazareth.

It’s a very well-known story, and a beautiful one. But did it happen? Among biblical scholars it is widely thought to be completely implausible, for several reasons:

- If Luke is right that Jesus was born during the reign of King Herod, Quirinius could not have been the governor; he became governor of Syria ten years after Herod’s death.
- We are well informed of the reign of Caesar Augustus. There is no record anywhere of a census in which “the whole world” (or, indeed “the whole Roman empire”) had to be taxed.
- More important, the census simply doesn’t make any sense. Joseph has to register in Bethlehem precisely because he is descended from King David who came from there.

- So, first of all, probably *most* Jews today are descended from King David, given how genealogies work. Did half the Jewish population of the world descend on Bethlehem?

- Second, David lived 1,000 years before Joseph. Are we to imagine that everyone in the Roman Empire is returning to their ancestral home from 1,000 years earlier? Imagine if the Democrats take over in this next election and our taxes get raised and you need to register with the IRS by returning to the home of your (say, patrilineal) ancestor from 1,000 years ago. Where will *you* go?

- And everyone in the empire is doing this? Imagine the absolutely massive population migrations. And there is no other source that even mentions it?

Finally, if Luke's account is right about the birth of Jesus, then the one other account that discusses it in the New Testament, the Gospel of Matthew, cannot also be right. Read Matthew's account: what happens after Jesus is born? In Matthew, Herod decides to kill all the children in Bethlehem because he doesn't want any competitors for his throne as "King of the Jews." But Joseph is warned in a dream and he escapes with Mary and Jesus to Egypt, where they stay until Herod dies. But if that's right, how can Luke also be right that they stayed in Bethlehem just 41 days (eight days till the circumcision; 33 days before the rites of purification) and then returned to Nazareth? If Luke's right, then Matthew can't be, and *vice versa*.

- All of this makes the account in Luke (and Matthew's account, too, but for other reasons) extremely improbable. The only way to make it work is to interpret it so that it means something other than it says. It can't literally be right. But why does Luke spin such a tale? For the reason I pointed out earlier. It's because he thinks that Jesus has to be born in Bethlehem — since that's to be the

home of the savior — even though he knows he came from Nazareth. And so, he came up with a story to explain it. The story, though, is almost certainly not historically accurate.

Applying These Results to the Stories of Jesus's Resurrection: The Discrepancies

We could look at lots and lots of stories in the Gospels that have similar problems, both because they contain discrepancies and because they involve serious problems of plausibility. Here in my last section, though, let me show how such problems affect the most important stories of the Gospels, the accounts of Jesus's resurrection from the dead.

Let me stress here a fairly obvious point. When historians try to reconstruct what happened in the past, they desperately want to find internally consistent sources. To that extent, they are like trial lawyers. Suppose there was a court case about a murder: All the witnesses on the stand agree that there was a murder, but that's the only thing they agree on. Everything they say — about the time, the place, the people involved, the weapons used, the events leading up to the murder, what happened immediately afterward — everything they say is different, from one witness to another, sometimes different in ways that simply can't be reconciled. And suppose some of them say things that simply defy plausibility. Would a trial lawyer — or a jury! — consider these to be reliable witnesses? How could they all be reliable?

So, too, with historical sources: We want independent and supportive accounts that are completely consistent with each other.

But when it comes to the resurrection narratives, that's not what we find. Here, I would encourage you again simply to do a horizontal reading of our four New Testament accounts (Matthew 28; Mark 16; Luke 24; John 20–21). For every detail, ask yourself if

you are reading the same account or a different account. What are the differences? It's fine, of course, for there to be differences: everyone will tell a story in his or her own way. But are the differences of the sort that don't matter for the accuracy of one account or another, or are they fundamentally at odds with one another? And do any of the accounts give information that is simply implausible, historically?

Here are some of the differences that you will find, some of which really can't be reconciled with one another. There are others you will find for yourself. (Recall the setting: Jesus has been crucified and buried in a tomb by Joseph of Arimathea; and then, on the third day...)

- Who goes to the tomb? Is it Mary by herself, or with other women? If with other women, how many women? And what are their names? (As is true for this and all the other points I made, the answer in each case will appear to be: "It depends which Gospel you read!")

- Do they find that the stone is already rolled away from the tomb (before they arrive) or does it roll away after they get there?

- Whom do they see there? A man? An angel? Two men? Two angels?

- Do they ever see Jesus himself there?

- What are they told there – that they are to go tell the disciples that Jesus will meet them in Galilee? Or that they are to remind the disciples what Jesus told them when he was in Galilee?

- That is, are the disciples to go to Galilee (about a four-day walk north) to see Jesus, or are they to stay in Jerusalem to see him?

- Do the women tell anyone? (Take special note of Mark 16:8. The original Gospel ended with that verse – as will probably be indicated in your Bible. It says, “And the women said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.” And that’s where it ends. If the author doesn’t really *mean* that they never told anyone, why does he say that they didn’t tell anyone? And if he thinks they did tell someone, why doesn’t he say so?)

- Do the disciples ever learn that Jesus has been raised (take note of Mark’s account)?

- Do the disciples go to Galilee? Or do they stay in Jerusalem?

- Does Jesus appear to them just on the day of his resurrection, and then ascend to heaven? Or does he make appearances for a period of time?

- Does he ascend on the day of the resurrection or 40 days later (see Acts 1)?

Let me explore briefly just one of those differences to show you why the accounts seem to be truly at odds with one another. Do the disciples meet Jesus in Galilee or do they never leave Jerusalem? In Mark’s Gospel, the women are told to tell the disciples to go to meet Jesus in Galilee. But they never tell them. So, it’s not clear what Mark thinks happens next: Did no one ever hear? Surely, *someone* heard, since Mark knows the story!

In any event, the women are told something very similar in Matthew, and there they do tell the disciples to go meet Jesus in Galilee. And the disciples go to Galilee (again, it’s about over 60 miles, and they would have gone on foot). Jesus meets with them there and gives them their final instructions, and that’s the end of the Gospel.

But how does that stack up with what we find in Luke's account? In this case, the women are not told to tell the disciples to go to Galilee; they are instructed to remind the disciples what Jesus had told them earlier when they were all in Galilee. And what happens? Here, it is very important to pay attention to Luke's explicit chronological statements. On the day of the event, the women tell the 11 disciples what they heard from the two men at the tomb (24:8). "That very same day" Jesus appears to two disciples on the Road to Emmaus (24:13–32). "At that same hour" they went and told the disciples in Jerusalem what they had seen (24:33–35). "As they were saying this" (24:36), Jesus then appears to the disciples, shows them he has been raised from the dead, and gives them their instructions, which include the injunction that they are to "stay in the city" until they receive the promised Spirit from on high (24:49). He then takes them to a suburb, Bethany, and ascends to heaven. The disciples then return to Jerusalem itself and worship in the temple (24:50–53). And that's where the Gospel ends, on the day of the resurrection, in Jerusalem.

As you probably know, the same author who wrote the Gospel of Luke also wrote the book of Acts. It is interesting, and puzzling, to read the first chapter of Acts immediately after reading the Gospel of Luke. Even though Jesus ascends to heaven on the day of his resurrection in Luke, we are told explicitly in Acts that in fact he stayed on earth for another 40 days, convincing his followers "with many proofs" that he had been raised from the dead (Acts 1:3 — I've always found this one of the most perplexing verses in the entire New Testament: Why would Jesus need to "prove" that he was raised from the dead? They knew he died and now he was still with them! So, what were his "many proofs"? It's an intriguing question!). For this entire 40 days, they have followed Jesus's

instruction, and are still in Jerusalem. He then ascends to heaven as they watch (1:9–11).

They continue to stay in Jerusalem until the Day of Pentecost (which would have been 50 days after Jesus's crucifixion), when they receive the Spirit from on high (Acts 2). And in fact, they continue to stay in Jerusalem even after that (see Acts chapters 3–8).

I am giving this relatively detailed summary in order to make a fundamental point. In Luke's version of the events, the disciples are told to stay in the city of Jerusalem and they do stay in the city of Jerusalem. Not for a day or two, but for weeks. This is where Jesus appears to them before ascending. But in Matthew's version, they leave Jerusalem and travel up to Galilee (it would take some days to get there on foot), and it is there that Jesus appears to them.

So, which is it? It depends on which Gospel you read. Can they both be absolutely accurate? I don't see how. They are at odds on a most fundamental point. I don't see how we can accept these books as historically reliable sources of information about what happened. There are simply too many discrepancies.

Now, you might say, *"Look, these books are trying to describe the most astounding event that ever transpired in human history. Of course the different storytellers had different ways of saying things. And who, when faced with such an amazing event, might not be confused and unable to say things in a completely clear and coherent way?"*

Fair enough! But my question is whether witnesses that are at odds with each other time and time again can be taken as reliable. Trial lawyers would almost certainly say not.

Applying These Results to the Stories of Jesus's Resurrection: Implausibility

There's one other problem with the accounts, and that is that they contain stories that simply defy what we would think of as plausible. Let me cite just one example, since I'm almost out of time and space. This is an intriguing story found only in Matthew's Gospel. According to Matthew, Jesus was not the only person raised from the dead. In fact, there were others. Why does none of the other Gospels mention this? It seems like it would be an important point.

According to Matthew, at the moment when Jesus died there were a number of enormous, cataclysmic, mind-boggling events that took place: the curtain in the temple was ripped in half (we have no record of this occurring, by the way, even though Jewish authors talk extensively about the temple at the time and would have been very interested indeed, if part of it had been destroyed!); there was a massive earthquake; "the rocks were split" (it's hard to know what that means exactly); and, most breathtaking of all, "the tombs also were opened, and many bodies of the saints who had fallen asleep were raised, and coming out of the tombs after his resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many" (Matthew 27:52–53).

Really? Are we supposed to think that masses of people came back to life and started walking around Jerusalem on the day that Jesus was raised? And no one else — whether Jews at the time, or Romans, or Christians, or even the other Gospel writers — thinks this is important enough to say something about? What is going on here?

Whatever is going on, almost certainly one thing that is not going on is a historically reliable report about what happened three

days after the death of Jesus. Even many good Bible-believing people find this one too hard to accept as historical. But if we concede that one part of the story is probably not reliable, what is to stop us from thinking that other parts are not reliable, either?

Some Concluding Reflections: On the Historicity of the Gospels

Let me just wrap up this discussion with a couple of concluding reflections. I begin by stressing a point that may not be altogether clear from my foregoing comments, but is how I started this commentary: I think the Gospels are among the most brilliant, inspirational, and significant writings that have come down to us from the ancient world — arguably the most important books ever to have been written. I love these books, as do, literally, billions of other people in the world.

But I also think that it is important to recognize both what the Gospels are and what they are not. What they are: These are four narratives that attempt to explain who Jesus was and what he said, did, and experienced. They were written by four different authors living many years after the events that they narrate. These authors do not claim to be eyewitnesses to the events they describe, and they almost certainly were not eyewitnesses. The eyewitnesses to Jesus's life were for the most part lower-class, illiterate, Aramaic-speaking peasants from rural Galilee. The Gospels are written by highly literate, well-educated, Greek-speaking authors from other parts of the Roman Empire. They are basing their accounts on stories that they have heard, stories that have been told by word of mouth, month after month, year after year, decade after decade.

You can probably imagine what happens to stories as they are circulated in this way. There was no way for the original eyewitnesses to control what one man told his wife, based on what

he heard from a business associate, who had heard stories from his neighbor, who once had a cousin who was married to someone who had known an eyewitness. The stories almost certainly got changed over time. That's why there are so many differences among them.

But they are fantastic stories. And for many people, they contain not simply inspiring accounts of the Savior, wise words that can help guide their lives; they contain the very words that can lead to eternal life. That is what the Gospels *are* for many, many people in our world. Without denying their inestimable value, though, it is also important to recognize what the Gospels are *not*.

They are documents of faith, but they are not reliable historical sources.

Ehrman Responds to Licona on New Testament Reliability

I would like to begin by thanking Mike for an interesting and lively argument in support of his view that the Gospels of the New Testament are, by and large, historically accurate and that their accounts of the resurrection of Jesus can be demonstrated, on historical grounds, to be reliable statements of what actually happened in the past.

Let me frame my response by saying something about my personal context in dealing with such questions. I myself came out of a similar religious context to that which Mike now finds himself in — the context within which he acquired his views about the Bible and about history. I went to a conservative Christian colleges (two of them!) out of high school, much like the schools Mike has worked in. The view that Mike has sketched out is very much what I myself

was told (and believed) about the Bible, and history, and the relationship between the two.

I need to say that that kind of context is not the one in which historical scholars typically develop and advance their views. It is a highly unusual context, and the views, assumptions, and presuppositions held by people who live and work in those contexts are not those of academics who work in any other context. Sometimes, we see something the way we do simply because that's how everyone in our immediate context sees it, as well. It seems normal to us. So normal that we think that it is normal. Even if it is not at all normal.

I left that context when I began to teach. Before starting on my university career, I had been to Moody Bible Institute, then Wheaton College, and then for both a master's and a Ph.D. degree, at Princeton Theological Seminary. All of these were thoroughly Christian schools and the students at all these schools were committed Christians who believed that God was active in history and that history was replete with activities of God. And that you could actually *show* it. So, that's what I thought. That's what everyone in those contexts seemed to think. That's what Mike thinks. Of course, he does: That's the context in which he lives, moves, and has his being.

I began my teaching career in a very different context, at a secular research university in New Jersey: Rutgers. After teaching there for four years, in 1988 I moved to the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, one of the truly great state universities in the country. My colleagues in both places have been specialists in a wide range of academic disciplines: classics, anthropology, American studies, philosophy, and lots of other disciplines, especially history. I live with and move among people who do

serious historical research for a living. That's what they have done for their entire academic lives. It's not a Christian school context, but the context of a purely academic, research institution.

There are some of Mike's positions, as he has sketched them out for us in his statement, which would be seen as completely non-problematic among scholars who are academic specialists in the field of history. These would include, for example, his use of ancient authors such as Suetonius and Plutarch for understanding the nature of the Gospel writings, and his case that by and large the Gospels are fairly reliable historical sources. There is nothing inherently problematic with either position. Some scholars would agree, some would disagree, but they could have a reasoned argument about it using the same terms and accepting the same presuppositions.

There are other things that Mike claims, though, that would not be accepted in this kind of environment, most notably his claim that you can demonstrate that Jesus was raised from the dead — that is, that a supernatural event from the past can be demonstrated on purely historical grounds as being highly probable. Mike does his best to argue that this is something that a historian, simply using historical evidence, can come to conclude. But he does not make a good case, and I can simply tell you as someone who lives and works with historians, that this is *not* the kind of view that you would ever find in the context of a major research university. You may find it at Baptist colleges, or independent fundamentalist colleges, or other kinds of denominational schools (whether colleges or seminaries). But at least in my experience, you will not find it in major research universities. You will never, ever have a history class that argues for supernatural occurrences in the past. Never.

That does not, of course, prove that the view is wrong. Not at all! But if you want to know what is widely seen by experts as acceptable argumentation, you should always ask the experts. If you want to know how physicists understand motion, you should ask physicists; if you want to know the proper methodology for conducting a chemical experiment, you should ask chemists; if you want to know how best to conduct ethnographic research, you should ask anthropologists; and if you want to know what are acceptable historical methodologies and assumptions, you should ask historians.

Still, let me stress that Mike has given probably the best defense one can imagine for his views, and he is to be commended for that. I will not be able, given space limitations, to speak at length about each and every one of his points — many of which I agree with and some of which (such as whether historians can speak about the supernatural) I heartily disagree with. But I do want to address some of the major issues, and will do so under a number of the key rubrics.

The Nature of the Gospels

I am glad to see that in one major way Mike and I agree about the Gospels. We agree that we cannot hold the Gospels to modern standards of accuracy, because if we do, the Gospels are not accurate. In Mike's words, the Gospels are “flexible with details” and they are comparable to modern movies that employ extensive “artistic license.” I couldn't agree more.

My sense is that when people today want to know whether the Gospels are historically accurate, what they want to know is this: Did the events that are narrated in the Gospels actually happen in the way the stories are told or not?

And so the natural question arises, as Mike himself raises it: What do we mean by historical accuracy? Let me tell you what I think most people mean. My sense is that when people today want to know whether the Gospels are historically accurate, what they want to know is this: Did the events that are narrated in the Gospels actually happen in the way the stories are told or not? People in general are interested in that basic question, not so much in the points that Mike raises. That is to say, people are not overly interested in the question of whether the Gospels stack up nicely in comparison with ancient biographers such as Plutarch and Suetonius. Of course they're not interested in that. Most people have never *read* Plutarch and Suetonius. I'd venture to say that most Bible readers have never even *heard* of Plutarch or Suetonius, or if they have, it's simply as some vague name of someone from the ancient world.

People don't care much, as a rule, about other ancient biographers and their tactics when talking about the Bible. They are interested in the Bible. Is it accurate? For most people that means: Did the stories happen in the way they are described or not? If they did happen that way, then the stories are accurate. If they did not happen in that way, they are not.

If it were, however, important to talk about the relationship of the Gospels to such ancient authors, then it would be worth pointing out, as Mike knows full well, that Plutarch and Suetonius are themselves not thought of as historically reliable sources in the way that many people hope and want the Gospels of the New Testament to be. Both authors tell a lot of unsubstantiated anecdotes about the subjects of their biographies; they include scandalous rumors and hearsay; they shape their accounts in light of their own interests; and they are far less interested in giving abundant historically accurate detail than in making overarching

points about the moral qualities of their characters. That is what Plutarch explicitly tells us he wants to do. He wants the lives that he describes to be models of behavior for his readers, and he shapes his stories to achieve that end. He is not concerned simply to give a disinterested historical sketch of what actually happened.

Mike thinks the Gospels are like Plutarch, and I completely agree. They are far more like Plutarch, and Suetonius, than they are like modern attempts at biography. In modern biographies, an author is concerned to make sure that everything told has been verified and documented and represents events as they really and truly happened. Ancient biographies, including the Gospels, are not at all like that.

And so, as Mike suggests, there are places where the Gospels have changed historical information out of “artistic license.” Mike gives a couple of examples of that, places where he thinks the Gospels are not historically accurate. Let me just pick up one of the two in order to show how it all works, since I think the example unpacks very nicely what the Gospels are actually like. This is the example that I gave at length in my opening Statement, and one that Mike has now indicated that he agrees with. It involves the difference between Mark and John on the day on which Jesus died.

Mark's account is unambiguous: Jesus's disciples make preparations for the annual Passover meal as he instructs them; that evening, on the day of Passover, they eat the meal with Jesus; afterward Jesus is arrested; he spends the night in jail and he is condemned to be crucified the next morning, the execution happening immediately, at 9:00 am. John's account is very different. Here, the disciples do not make preparations for the Passover and the final meal they have is not said to be a Passover. Instead, Jesus is arrested and spends the night in jail and is condemned and

executed on what John explicitly tells us is the day *before* the Passover meal was eaten.

As Mike indicates, John appears to have changed a historical datum in order to stress his theological point. In John's Gospel Jesus dies precisely on the day when the Passover lambs were being slaughtered in preparation for the Passover meal that evening. It is the day *before* Jesus dies in the Gospel of Mark. In Mark Jesus lives through that day, and that evening he eats the meal and then dies the next day.

I am perfectly happy to agree with Mike that John has done this. Or, one could argue, maybe Mark has done it. Maybe Mark has changed the historical reality in order to make a theological point (if that's how it happened, then Mark wanted Jesus's last meal to be a Passover so that Jesus could instill increased significance in the symbolic Passover bread and cup). In either case, someone has changed the account.

But I don't think we should pass over (so to say) the significance of this change too quickly. If we take John's account to be historically accurate, then what does that mean? Doesn't it mean that Jesus did not have a Passover meal with his disciples? Doesn't that mean that he didn't institute the Last Supper? Doesn't that mean that the communion meal that Christians celebrate today is not actually rooted in the Lord's Supper that Jesus himself established? That seems rather important!

But if Mark is accurate and John is not, doesn't that also show beyond any doubt that the Gospel writers (John in this case) were (sometimes? many times?) more interested in making their theological points about Jesus than in recording history as it actually happened? So, we shouldn't skip over this example too

quickly or shove it aside. It has enormous implications. And it's an example that Mike actually agrees with.

So, here's the big question: If John was willing to do this in this one instance that Mike himself cites, in how many other instances was he willing to do it? Why should we think that this is the one and only place that John did it? If he did it in a few other places, which ones are they? Are there lots of them? Will they always be ones that we are able to detect? We can detect this one only because both John and Mark explicitly tell us the day on which Jesus died (in John it is the day before the Passover meal was eaten; in Mark it is the day after it was eaten). How many times does John change the story in ways that we are *not* able to detect?

I hope you see the problem. Mike has admitted the Gospels are not historically reliable. Yes, they maybe be reliable by ancient standards — as reliable, say, as one of Suetonius's notorious anecdotes about one of the emperors. But that's not what readers of the Bible want to know. They generally don't want to know if the Gospel stories are as reliable as Suetonius. They want to know if the accounts they describe happened in the way they are described. If they did not happen that way, are they accurate in the way we are concerned about?

My own view is that the kind of thing John did with the dating of Jesus's death is the kind of thing that happens all over the place in the Gospels, up and down the line. I agree with Mike that in very broad outlines, much of what the Gospels say is historically right: in the present instance, for example, it is almost certainly right that Jesus was condemned to be crucified by the Roman governor Pontius Pilate sometime around the Passover feast, the night after Jesus had some kind of final meal with his disciples. So far, so good! But can we trust the Gospels in any of the details? Or not? If not, if

the Gospels are in fact playing loose with the details out of what Mike calls “artistic license,” how can we trust them to give reliable accounts of Jesus, outside of the very broadest outlines?

I'd like to conclude this section by asking Mike to do us all a favor. He has named two places in the Gospels where he thinks the authors have probably changed their stories (or invented them) for artistic reasons (the second case being the multitude of dead people who are said to have come out of their tombs in Matthew's account of the Jesus's death and resurrection). I agree completely with both places. But I would like to know more, and I'm sure many of our readers would, as well. So, I would like to ask Mike to provide us with four or five other instances in which he thinks the Gospel writers have done the same thing that he thinks they have done in these instances: changed (or invented) stories of Jesus in order to help them make the theological points they wanted to make.

That should be very easy to do, and we all would love to see more of such details!

Reasons for Thinking the Gospels Are Indeed Accurate

Even though Mike concedes that the Gospels are *not* accurate in terms that modern readers typically hope, he goes on to claim that they are *by and large* accurate, and he tries to make a case for that. Here is one area that we have very strong disagreements, and if I were to spend as much time as I needed in order to show why I think this view is wrong, it would take me an entire book. As it turns out, I have indeed written a book that deals with the issue; it is called *Jesus Interrupted* (HarperOne, 2010), and you should feel free to buy a copy for each of your friends and loved ones. It makes a great birthday present.

Here, I'll simply deal with two points that Mike makes, and then reiterate a point that I stress in my opening statement that, in my judgment, clinches the argument.

First, I was confused when Mike wants to argue that the Gospels contain “no historical anachronisms.” My handy *Webster's Dictionary* defines an “anachronism” as “a chronological misplacing of persons, events, objects, or customs.” The reason I'm confused by Mike's claim is this: He already has *told* us that he thinks the Gospels contain historical anachronisms. That's what it means to say that an author, because of artistic license, has changed the sequence of historical events so that they are no longer accurate. When John says that Jesus died the day *before* he actually died, that is by definition an anachronism. And Mike thinks John did that. So, how can he say there are no anachronisms in the Gospels?

Let me give you a second, even more famous instance. This involves not the death of Jesus, but his birth. The Gospel of Luke is quite explicit (see 2:2) that Jesus was born when Quirinius was the governor of Syria; this was also during the reign of Herod, King of Israel (1:5; and, of course, Matthew 2). But this is an enormous problem. Luke appears not to have known the history of Palestine as well as we might like. We know from clear and certain statements in Josephus (the prominent Jewish historian) and inscriptions that Quirinius became governor of Syria in 6 CE. But Herod died in 4 BCE, ten years earlier. Their reigns did not overlap. Luke has simply made a historical mistake. It's an anachronism. (Christian apologists always try to reconcile this one: Mike may try to do so as well; but let me tell you, ancient historians who do not have a horse in this race have never ever been convinced by the extreme lengths one has to go to in order to make Quirinius and Herod rule at the same time. It simply is a historical mistake.)

Rather than detail a list of anachronisms in the Gospels, let me deal with one other argument that Mike makes in support of the essential reliability of the Gospels. It's an argument that sounds convincing in the abstract, but far less convincing when you actually look at it. It is the argument advanced by conservative British scholar Richard Bauckham, who argues that the Gospels appear to be reliable because (in Mike's words)

. . . the names mentioned in the Gospels and Acts are not only common names of Palestinian Jews in that period and not belonging to Diaspora Jews, they appear with roughly the same frequency . . . that we find in the extrabiblical data.

Now, that certainly sounds impressive at first glance! But wait a second. How does it prove that the Gospels are reliable? What if I, as an American, want to tell a story about how on March 22, 2016, two people in France, François and Renée, engaged in a terrorist attack in Paris and placed a bomb at the glass pyramid in the Louvre, leading to the deaths of 49 people. Did that happen? Well, no, today, as I write, it is March 26, 2016, and I can assure you that no such thing happened.

But suppose in two thousand years, a scholar uncovers my account. He wants to know if it's accurate. And instead of checking the newspapers, to see if in fact a bomb did go off, he checks the names. And it turns out, France was the name of a country back then! And Paris was the name of an important city! And the Louvre was the name of an important museum! And François and Renée were names very common in France at the time — far more common than in America, where I myself was writing. This shows it! The story must be true!

No, the story is not true. It simply uses the right names. Using the right names has no bearing on whether the stories are accurate

or not. It simply means that the storytellers knew what names they should use in telling their tales.

How do you know if the stories *are* accurate, if they do tell us things that actually happened in the way they are described? The best way to know is the way that I indicated at length in my statement. It is a method that you yourself can use. I urge you — in the strongest terms! — to use it if you are interested in this question (which I assume you are since you are still reading at this point). Simply take different accounts of the same event in two or more of the Gospels, and compare them in detail. Take the two accounts of Jesus's birth in Matthew and Luke; or the four accounts of Jesus's resurrection in the Gospels; or any accounts found in more than one of these books. Compare them. Carefully. In detail. Line by line and word for word. Note all the similarities and differences. And ask whether the differences can actually be reconciled or not. Do it with a bunch of stories. Then make up your own mind.

The Strength of Memory

Mike wants to argue that it is not at all implausible that writers living 40–65 years after the fact might well remember in detail things that happened in Jesus's life. After all, each of us can remember things that happened to us many, many years ago. Often, these memories are still quite vivid to us. Right? Mike gives a number of personal examples.

I'm afraid this is one area where Mike simply does not know the scholarship. Until three years ago, I didn't know it, either. But the scholarship is there, and it is absolutely conclusive. Vivid memories are not the same as accurate memories. We may remember something as clearly as the day we experienced it. But the memories are often wrong.

When I say that the scholarship is absolutely conclusive, I'm not just blowing smoke. About three years ago, I became very interested in how memory works, and so I started reading about it. In fact, for nearly two years I did almost nothing else in my free time. I didn't read any scholarship on the New Testament, or early Christianity, or . . . or anything else I'm interested in. I read what scholars of memory have to tell us about memory. I read cognitive psychologists and what they have to say about our individual memories. I read legal scholars to see what we know about the memories of eyewitnesses with respect to the events they have witnessed. I read sociologists to learn how our social contexts affect our personal recollections. I read cultural anthropologists and their studies of oral cultures where traditions are passed along by word of mouth. I have to say, this was an exhilarating time of research for me.

I learned tons. Tons of things I never knew before. Things not based on what we might assume, but based on hard-core research by scholars dedicated to nothing but knowing what we can say about memory.

And what the scholars say is just the opposite of what Mike is claiming. **The reality is that our vivid memories are not necessarily accurate memories. We think they are — of course we do! But, well, they often are not.** I could cite hundreds of studies, but, well, you won't want me to. So, let me cite just one. If you want more, then simply read my book *Jesus Before the Gospels* (HaperOne, 2016), where I deal with such things. If you want more beyond that, read the scholarship that I cite in the book. If you want more still, read the other scholarship cited in the scholarship that I cite in the book. But here's just one illustration, chosen out of hundreds of options.

We all remember perfectly well where we were, with whom, at what time of day, and so on, when we learned about 9/11. All of us do. Or do we? Here's a harrowing study, the results of which have been verified in similar studies done by other psychologists. I cite it here as it appears in my book. It deals not with 9/11, but with another disaster that took place 25 years earlier. Still, it is one that we also all remembered at the time (if we were old enough to be aware of what was happening in the world): the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger*. Here's what I say about the event a “false” (but vivid) memories of it that people had/have, in my book:

Psychologists can be very clever about how they go about showing such things. A classic study, which set the stage for much research . . . undertaken by psychologists Ulric Neisser and Nicole Harsch, who were perceptive enough to realize that a personal and national disaster could be important for realizing how memory works. The day after the space shuttle *Challenger* exploded on January 28, 1986, they gave 106 students in a psychology class at Emory University a questionnaire asking about their personal circumstances when they heard the news. A year and a half later, in the fall of 1988, they tracked down forty-four of these students and gave them the same questionnaire. A half year later, spring 1989, they interviewed forty of these forty-four about the event.

The findings were startling but very telling. To begin with, 75% of those who took the second questionnaire were certain they had never taken the first one. That was obviously wrong. In terms of what was being asked, there were questions about where they were when they heard the news, what time of day it was, what they were doing at the time, whom they learned it from, and so on — seven questions altogether. 25% of the participants got every single answer wrong on the second questionnaire, even though their memories were vivid and they were highly confident in their

answers. Another 50% got only two of the seven questions correct. Only three of the forty-four got all the answers right the second time, and even in those cases there were mistakes in some of the details. When the participants' confidence in their answers was ranked in relation to their accuracy there was “no relation between confidence and accuracy at all” in forty-two out of the forty-four instances.

You might think — or at least I did — that after the second questionnaire, when the students were shown the original answers they had filled out the just a day after the explosion, they would realize they had since then misremembered and they would revive their original memories. This did not happen. It decidedly did not happen. Instead, when confronted with evidence of what really took place, they consistently denied it and said that their present memories were the correct ones. In the words of the researchers: “No one who had given an incorrect account in the interview even pretended that they now recalled what was stated on the original record. As far as we can tell, the original memories are just gone.”

This is a sobering point indeed. All of us have vivid memories of the past. These are the memories we trust the most. We are absolutely *certain* it happened the way we remember: Why else would it be vivid? The answer is that it might be vivid because we have replayed the event in our memory time and time again in the same, wrong, way. So now that's how we remember it. Vividly.

I think all Gospel scholars should read more about memory. **The Gospels are ultimately based on memory: memories of eyewitnesses, memories of what someone remembered an eyewitness telling them, memories of a person trying to remember a story told to him by his wife who heard the story from her next door neighbor who was remembering what her cousin told her based on what he had**

learned from a business associate whose mother had, only fifteen years earlier, talked with an eyewitness. At every stage of this “remembering” experience (mainly: remembering what someone else said), people are trying to recall something that happened to them (or that they heard). Memories are faulty. That's a problem when dealing with oral traditions in circulation for decades.

I used to think that it was all different in oral cultures, where everything was more or less passed along by word of mouth. Surely, in those cultures stories are not changed much, right? Well, wrong. They are changed. Changed a lot. Every time. This, too, has been demonstrated time and time again by scholars. In my book I cite the relevant scholarship. You don't need to take my word for it. No reason you should! Simply read what experts have to say based on research that paints a very different picture from the one that you might (and I did!) imagine to be true, researchers such as Albert Lord, Jack Goody, Walter Ong, and Jan Vansina. The scholarship is all there, and it all points in the same direction. That direction is *away* from the sense that oral cultures preserve their traditions in a way that we today would consider accurate (which, as I pointed out at the beginning, is what we are talking about when dealing with the accuracy of the Gospels).

The Historian and Miracles

I think one of the methodologically weakest parts of Mike's statement is where he wants to argue that historians can indeed talk about miracles happening. As I said at the beginning of this reply, I understand where he is coming from. This is the view that I too had when I, like Mike now, was surrounded by people who not only believed miracles happen (as I'm sure most of you do!), but also think they can be *shown* to have happened (which is not the same thing!). If that's what everyone around you thinks, then it's no

surprise you think it, as well. But is it academically tenable? Can historians talk about miracles?

Here, I would like to issue a challenge to Mike. If Mike wants to maintain that respectable historians can and do appeal to miracle, I want him to give us some examples. I would like the names of four or five reputable historians — not conservative evangelical Christians who are personally committed to a belief in the resurrection (as is the main figure that he cites, Gary Habermas). But just regular ole academic historians. There are thousands in the country, in many historical fields (ancient Rome; European Middle Ages; American history; and on and on). Which of them agree that we can demonstrate miracles and which of them in fact to argue for miracles in the books that they have written about past events?

In addition, I would like Mike to take some specific historical events that we might believe God had a hand in, for example, the discovery of America by Columbus, or the victory of the Allies in World War II, or the election of Ronald Reagan — take any example. And name some historians who indicate that the intervention of God as one of the reasons, or the very reason, that it happened. If Mike's view is the view accepted by historians, then this should be a relatively simple exercise for him and we would all benefit from it.

But frankly I don't believe Mike will be able to do this. And there's a reason for that. It's not because historians have to be secularists who don't believe in God. Many historians do indeed believe in God. But they know that divine intervention is not and cannot be a historical datum that can be either assumed or demonstrated. That's just the reality of the case.

Mike gives two rather peculiar arguments, though, in favor of historians being able to cite miracles, and we should consider them.

The first is the death of King Ludwig II and his physician in 1886. Scholars have never been able to ascertain why they died. Mike uses that to show that historians sometimes don't know the cause for an event and he concludes that historians then have to concede that miracles have happened. I have to confess, I don't see how this example has anything to do with the question of how historians can talk about miracles. People die all the time. It often happens that we don't know why. How does that suggest that we can demonstrate the probability of miracles on historical grounds?

The second argument is even more odd for my tastes. Mike suggests a hypothetical situation where he gets beheaded by a Muslim terrorist on the stage of an auditorium and then later he reappears with his head on. Wouldn't that prove that a miracle happened? Wouldn't I have to agree then that it happened? Even if I didn't want to say it was a miracle, wouldn't I have to say that, yes, he was beheaded, and yes, he now is not beheaded?

I'm sorry, but this is too strange. In order to show that we can demonstrate that miracles have happened, why has Mike chosen as his proof an incident that has never, ever, happened in the history of the human race? He is illustrating his point not just with a hypothetical situation, but a hypothetical situation that has never occurred. If it has never occurred, how can we say that it probably really happened?

Let me give you an analogy. What if I wanted to prove to you that the moon was made out of green cheese? I know you aren't going to believe me. So, in order to prove it to you, I give you a hypothetical. What if the U.S. decided again to send an astronaut to the moon, and this time he brought back a rather suspicious collection of rocks. These rocks, when tested, all turned out to be made of green cheese. There is no way these rocks are anything

other than what was found on the surface of the moon: we have videotapes of the astronaut collecting them and storing them and bringing them back. And there is no doubt that when examined, they really did turn out to be green cheese. And so the moon really is made of green cheese! Don't you agree?

If the hypothetical is something that never, ever could occur, then in fact it does not have any persuasive force. That's true not only of cheese moon rocks, but also of reanimated bodies of beheaded Christian apologists.

The Resurrection of Jesus

I have said a lot about the traditions surrounding the accounts of Jesus's resurrection in a number of my books, most especially *How Jesus Became God* (HarperOne, 2014). I don't need to repeat all that here, for which we can all be grateful. The biggest point of all is the one that I just made: historians, when acting like historians, cannot discuss a miracle of God as the most probable explanation for what happened in the past. I know that Mike really wants historians to be able to do that. But the fact remains that they can't. And they don't. They just don't. And for very good reasons, some of which I've already pointed out.

Let me also note that Mike agrees that there are times when historians simply can't know what caused a historical event (e.g., the death of King Ludwig). That's exactly right. And if God caused a historical event, that's something a historian can't know, using the tools available to him or her as a historian. It may be too bad that that's the case, but it's the case.

I think Mike is a bit disingenuous when he gets to this issue in his statement, where he indicates that someone could maintain that Jesus really was raised from the dead without believing that God had done it. How would that work exactly? This is where Mike (it's

near the end of his discussion, three paragraphs before his conclusion) gets extremely vague: maybe a historian could say Jesus was raised “without being able to identify the cause”! Or maybe the historian could “posit a theoretical entity” such as God, to explain it. Or maybe a historian could conclude it was a near-death experience.

There are all sorts of problems with these “maybe's.” In the end, they wind up being the same thing, though: Mike is confusing historical data with personal conclusions. There are certain historical data that in *principle* historians could talk about. They could talk about whether, for example, three days after Jesus was placed in a tomb the tomb was discovered to be empty. Or they could talk about whether some time after Jesus's death his disciples claimed they saw him alive afterward. There can be historical explanations for both of these phenomena — assuming they are historical phenomena. (I'm personally not sure the empty tomb is a historical datum. It's worth remembering, for example, that Paul — our first author to refer to Jesus's resurrection — doesn't know anything about an empty tomb; and it's not hard at all — contrary to what Mike says — to figure out who might have come up with the story of women visiting the tomb and finding it empty. Women might have come up with the story, for example! Or, as I show in my book, since the view coincides perfectly with what Mark has to say about men and women throughout his Gospel, Mark, or someone like him, may easily have come up with it.

And as to hallucinations, if Mike *really* and *truly* believes that groups of people cannot have hallucinations, I would love to know how he explains the fact that we have extremely well-documented instances of the Blessed Virgin Mary appearing to large groups of her followers — within the past few decades!)

But when Mike starts in on his “maybe's,” he is not asking about how maybe we could explain these data. He's asking how maybe we could explain the personal *conclusion* that Mike himself, and many others, draw from these data. The conclusion he reaches is that Jesus really was physically raised from the dead, and he wonders if there are ways to account for that without believing in God. And that's what makes him suggest those maybe's.

But historians do not come up with causalities to explain conclusions they have already drawn from an examination of the data. The conclusions they draw are causal explanations for the data. Mike has gotten the matter reversed. The only way to *conclude* that Jesus was raised from the dead is to believe in some kind of supernatural power that raised him. That's not part of the data. That's part of the causal explanation that Mike is using to make sense of the data.

This becomes clear when you consider any one of Mike's “maybe's.” For example, he suggests that maybe Jesus was not raised from the dead, but that he had a “near-death experience,” as people sometimes have. This is an interesting thesis, and I wonder if Mike would be willing to pursue it. It would be possible, of course, for historians to make this argument (some have!) — that Jesus's return from “the dead” was from being “nearly dead,” since near-death experiences do not require the existence of the supernatural (you may think they do, but they don't; neurologists have given various completely natural explanations for why these things happen; you may not agree with the scientific explanations, but my point is that they exist and you don't need to believe in the supernatural to think that some people have these experiences for completely natural reasons). And so, is Mike seriously proposing this as an alternative to the idea that God raised Jesus from the dead? Does he really think that it's possible that Jesus did not really

die on the cross? That he simply woke up in the tomb, just as some people wake up on the operating table? If that is his view, I'd like to see him explain it more fully. If it's not his view, I'd like to know why he rejects it.

But my (rather educated guess) is that Mike doesn't think this for a second and doesn't think it's even plausible. If that's the case — if the explanation is not plausible — then it's not clear to me why he thinks that historians should maybe draw it as a conclusion. Mike will be able to cite good reasons for doubting that Jesus simply awoke in the tomb and came back to life, only to die again some days, months, or years later. That's what a near-death experience is. The person always dies again. But [the Christian belief in the resurrection is the belief that God raised Jesus from the dead and exalted him to heaven where he lives forever more, never again to die](#). Does Mike think that a historian can demonstrate *that*? How could a historian possibly demonstrate that? That's a theological/religious claim about Jesus. It is not a historical datum. If Mike thinks that it is something that can be historically proved, I need to tell him — and you — that [there's not a reputable, professional historian in the universe who would agree that it is within the purview of the historical disciplines to show that Jesus has been exalted to the right hand of God](#).

An Important Final Point

Let me conclude this Response by making just one major point, a point that is completely obvious to most historians but that often strikes others (including most of my students!) as very odd indeed. It is this. [HISTORY IS NOT THE PAST](#). And, one could add, [THE PAST IS NOT HISTORY](#).

[Here is the difference. The past is everything that has happened before now. Over the past five seconds, trillions of things happened](#)

just in my town of Durham, NC. All of it is in the past. How much of it is history? Very little. History is what historians can *show* probably happened in the past.

The past has always happened. But history is the process of showing what happened. Doing history is always a probability game. Sometimes, probabilities are really good. It is probable that last night in the NCAA basketball tournament my North Carolina Tar Heels beat the Indiana Hoosiers (and that I won a very nice bottle of wine from a Hoosier fan as a result!). I can pretty much show that this probably happened.

There are other things in the past — the hugely vast majority of things — that we simply cannot show happened. They are parts of the past. But they are not parts of history. **History is only what we can show (probably) happened.**

Sometimes, we can't show what happened because we just don't have sources of information. That's usually the case. Very rarely do we have sources of information for the trillions of things that happen every second of the day. It's no one's fault. History just can't accommodate all of the past. There are some things that are simply inaccessible to us, even if they are in the past.

Suppose you believe in God. In fact, I'm sure that almost all of you do. And suppose that you think God has acted in the past, intervened in history, affected how things happened and what happened. Suppose you think God was directing the Europeans to “discover” America; or that God determined that the Allies would win WWII; or, on a personal level, that your sick child would recover or that you would find a job after experiencing unemployment or any of the other hundreds of things you are grateful to God for. Suppose you think all these things, and suppose you are right. I'm not saying you're wrong — let's say you're right.

If you are, then these acts of God would be in the past. But they would not be part of what historians call “history.” You might think that is unfortunate, but it's simply the way it is, and here is why.

The historical disciplines are forced by the very nature of things to build their case about what happened in the past on shared assumptions — shared by everyone engaged in the investigation. There are certain assumptions that everyone in the field can be expected to have: for example, that there is a past, that things really did happen before now, that evidence survives that can demonstrate what happened before now. Historians share those views.

There are other things that historians do not share. Historians do not necessarily share the same aesthetic sensitivities. And so historians cannot demonstrate, using the historical disciplines, that a particular Emily Dickinson poem is beautiful. They may certainly think so — but it is not a historical judgment. (They can show that a poem contained elements that people have long considered beautiful; but that's not the same thing). So too, historians do not necessarily share moral judgments. And so historians cannot demonstrate, on historical grounds, that Ronald Reagan was a *good* man. They may think so, but there are no specifically historical criteria (as opposed to ethical or moral criteria) that can demonstrate it. (You can show that he did things that are widely perceived to be good, but that's a different matter.) And so, too, historians do not necessarily share religious beliefs. That means that **historians – using historical methods – cannot show that the Christian God has intervened in history in order to accomplish his will. They may think so, some of them. But belief in the Christian God is not one of the assumptions that historians share, and so when doing history, it cannot be part of the equation.**